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MIRIAM'S MARRIAGE.

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID,

AUTHOR OF "PATTY," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MIRIAM'S MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER I.

NEWS FOR NANCY.

THERE are people in the world who leave things to chance, as they call it, in a kind of blind trust that matters will arrange themselves as they wish, as if they believed in household fairies who would make beds and cook dinners, while they themselves sit with their eyes shut. The Dutchmen who died in Spitzbergen must have been of this sort of folk. There is another class which, to outward seeming, is like

this one, but radically it is quite different; these people believe all will come right if a higher Will than their own so wills it for their good, but they work on meanwhile with both hands, so as to do their part in furthering the desired end. Mr. Purton of Shallerton did not belong to either of these sections. He liked to grease the wheels of destiny, and he had a strong belief in his own power of settling the affairs of life in the best possible way for every one.

He had resolved in his own determined fashion that Robert should marry Miss Montgomery; he did not care what price he might have to pay in the way of settlement.

"If all's true that one hears of Spenser Montgomery," he said, "that fine gentleman lives a trifle beyond his income; and if so he'll be glad enough at heart of such a responsible son-in-law as Robert, though no doubt there'll be a fuss with him at starting."

At the post-office, on the evening of Rizpah Blane's visit to the coterie there assembled, Mr. Purton had learned that Nancy Blane intended to leave Shallerton on Wednesday, and he determined that she should have her eyes opened in regard to his son and Miss Montgomery, before she went to Fernside.

And yet Mr. Purton shrank from presenting himself at the wheelwright's cottage—he was not at all sentimental; he did not shrink from the haunting memories there—that the girl whose heart he meant deliberately to wound was the daughter of the quiet, gentle man, so inseparable in recollection from the angle fronting the common where Matthew had smoked his pipe every afternoon of his silent, solitary life; the daughter also of the first love of his own youth—of the sweet-faced woman whose image still haunted the lattice-

window, from which he had last seen her look at him in smiling happy indifference; the woman he thought he could have made so much happier than his rival had made her. It was Nancy herself that Mr. Purton shrank from.

"Nancy is a wiser woman than her mother was"—a sneering smile crossed his face—"but I didn't give up marrying for love myself, to see Robert make a fool of himself when I've raised him to a higher position than I ever thought of reaching: why, if Robert chose to live as he ought to live, to let me build him a better house, to keep a proper establishment, he might visit any one he likes—instead of ranking himself with farmers; no one visits a mere farmer."

His hands went down into his pockets; he was intensely discomfited: the one darling scheme of his life had been its one signal failure.

He was sitting in the little octagon room beside the fire thinking, and as he thought his face grew very gloomy indeed.

He brightened up a little at last. Mr. Purton had the merit of being able to bear his own burdens; he did not confide them to the world and expect it to carry them for him; the recollection of Clara Montgomery's face beside Robert as they rode together was an earnest that a change might be worked even in his impracticable son.

"And a woman will make him do what no man could. Those slow pig-heads of fellows are managed best by women: where I get out of patience with his want of perception and discernment, a woman, not having the superior grasp of mind which gets ruffled by such deficiency, would coax and win him round before he knew where he was; and that girl has a will

of her own, I know, for all her sweet looks; there's a lofty air about her which, setting other advantages aside, is what Robert wants in a wife; she's one who will draw him up to her level instead of sinking to his."

But the subject to be dealt with was Nancy Blane, and Mr. Purton was no procrastinator. It is one of the compensations to persons of small imaginative power that they rarely put off practical matters; they have their faculties always well under control, not so much from self-discipline as because they are so seldom tempted off the high road by straying by-paths in the shape of ideas.

He must certainly see Nancy Blane, but as certainly he was resolved not to see her at her own cottage. Rizpah had not said where her niece was going, but Mr. Purton had guessed that it was reticence rather than real ignorance that kept her silent.

"She is going to Fernside," he said, "and she will go by the morning train."

It would be far more independent, and in every way more pleasant, to meet Nancy Blane in the road, or even at the station, than in her home. Mr. Purton winced still with annoyance at his own sensitiveness when he remembered her defiant tone beside the river Spar.

"I don't wish any harm to the girl, I'm sure I don't," Mr. Purton said to himself just before he went to sleep—he liked to go to sleep with benevolent thoughts in his head—"on the contrary, I wish her well, and I would gladly help to get her married, suitably married, to a man in her own rank of life. I'll do what I can for her, but as to her thinking of Robert, it's a manifest absurdity. She would have managed him, I grant you that, but not in the right way," said Mr. Purton to his

bed-curtains; "he would have sunk instead of rising. Fancy Nancy Blane on horseback, looking as Miss Montgomery looked, or driving in a carriage, or at the head of a dinner-table."

The idea was so absurd that he laughed quite aloud and went to sleep with this pleasant joke in his head.

Next morning Mr. Purton dressed himself with extra care and soberness—almost as if he were going to a funeral. He was so impatient for this interview that he had nearly reached the bottom of the slope when he saw Nancy coming out of the wheelwright's cottage.

She did not see him. She came briskly along the road, looking neither to right or left, but with her eyes fixed on the ground.

Spite of all his prejudices, Mr. Purton could not help admiring the girl's firm tread and her well-grown, shapely figure.

"She is a fine girl," he said, with emphasis; "differently bred, she might have been somebody, and yet I don't know. Nothing could make Nancy stylish."

Here Nancy came up to him. She started and flushed with surprise, but she tried to bow and pass on.

"How d'ye do?" and Mr. Purton held her hand a moment in the way which some men consider a mark of favour. "I have not gone to see you, Miss Nancy —I have been much occupied—but I have not thought the less of your sad loss, nor of my late lamented friend;" then, with a sudden jerk, he relapsed into his usual tone.

"You're going to see your sister, eh? they have no notion about that business at the cottage by the river, I fancy?"

He looked inquisitively at Nancy. His scrutiny was satisfactory.

She might separate Miriam from Mr.

Brendon as soon as she chose now; he was not afraid that she would try to win Robert away from Clara Montgomery.

"She's so proud," he thought, as he stood looking at her, "that I believe she'd go twenty miles the other way if she felt sure Robert had given her up, or if she knew he liked talking to another girl."

"Yes," said Nancy, coldly—she could not deceive Mr. Purton. "Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn knows everything."

"About Miriam you mean?" The words almost choked him in their hurried utterance; he felt actual terror lest Nancy should have told her own love-story.

"What else could I mean?" The scorn in Nancy's eyes was very exasperating—perhaps nothing is so exasperating as to find yourself despised by a much poorer person.

Mr. Purton reddened.

"Oh, I didn't know," he said, spitefully;

"women are so fond of talk. I was afraid you might have said something, you know, about your fancy for Robert, and that would have been a pity for your own sake just now."

Nancy's eyes searched him through and through, but Mr. Purton had mastered his difficulty, which had been how to open this awkward subject. Having begun he had no false shame to keep him silent.

"You see," he went on, "that little affair was all a mistake, and you showed most excellent sense in putting an end to it, and I'm sure you'll be glad to know"—he went on very fast, for Nancy looked determined to interrupt him—"that my son is now likely to make a very suitable marriage, suitable in point of position" — here Mr. Purton's thumbs went complacently into his waistcoat pockets—"and also suitable so far as inclination is concerned on either side;

it's a niece of Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn." Mr. Purton looked full at Nancy, with a mixture of triumph and compassion.

"It is quite settled then?"—Nancy said coldly. She had turned a little pale, but she could not willingly have shown Mr. Purton the pain she suffered.

"Well" — he smiled and rubbed his hands—"I suppose Mr. Montgomery and I shall have a good deal to say to one another first about settlements and so forth. Miss Montgomery is very charming and stylish, but she has no fortune, and Robert has a right to expect money with his wife. I'm sure, when you come to reflect on it"—he spoke kindly; Nancy's increasing paleness was slowly awakening him to sympathy with her—"you'll think I was right for your sake in opposing his liking for you. You see it could not have been lasting if he has changed so soon. You

agree with me, don't you?" Nancy had begun to move on, and he found himself obliged to follow her along the road. "You never could have suited one another."

"Mr. Purton"—Nancy did not want to speak, but she must be freed somehow from this intolerable persecution—"why do you force yourself on me in this way? Can't you be content with what you have done already?" she said, with a sudden burst of fierceness.

"Bless my soul!" said the timber-merchant. "Good-day, Miss Blane."

Nancy sped past him, and involuntarily he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "I'd no notion the girl was so excitable. Why, her eyes blazed. I thought she would have flown at me."

CHAPTER II.

A PROPOSAL.

Wool applied instantly to a burn or scald deadens pain; and, turning away from the spot where Nancy had left him, Mr. Purton was sensible of a sudden relief and soothing in finding himself a few minutes after met by Miss Wackstead.

For a few moments the sting lingered.

Could Miss Wackstead have heard Nancy's last unwarrantable words? How Matthew Blane's daughter had ever forgotten herself sufficiently to utter them was the uppermost thought in Mr. Purton's disturbed mind; but Miss Wackstead

smiled at him very sweetly, and her softness did its healing work.

"So glad to see you," she murmured gently, and glanced up at him from under her half-dropped veil like a shy kitten.

Miss Wackstead's shyness was very charming indeed. No one could call it affected; there was so much repose and grace about all she did and all she said.

"Ah! I'm glad too, my dear Miss Wackstead"—Mr. Purton looked at her earnestly; he had never felt less self-complacent, and by a natural consequence his companion became more adorable than ever—"what a blessing it is for an overbusy man like me to be refreshed by such an unexpected pleasure. I was feeling very much worried"—he passed his hand over his forehead and looked at his boots.

"And worry I am told is such a terrible thing." Miss Wackstead spoke as if her

words were sugared; but there was gentle reproof in those soft eyes of hers. "Why do you give way to it? Do you know," she said, with infantine candour, "I don't know what worry is? I never let it come near me."

Mr. Purton drank in her bewitching smile thirstily. What a blessed creature this was, as simple as a daisy, and yet with every attribute of perfect womanhood.

Mr. Purton made this remark to himself as he stood looking at her. It did not occur to him that some people eschew worry as they eschew trouble of any kind, by laying it on the shoulders of their neighbours.

"If I could always look at you I should not worry so much either," to himself.

"You are lucky," he said aloud, or "perhaps I ought to say, admirable in all things." Miss Wackstead gave a graceful little

bend here. "I've no doubt you are right; if I were to be less susceptible of annoyances it would be much better for me, but I can't." The poor man looked helplessly at his smiling mentor.

"I'm going home,"—Miss Wackstead looked so prettily proper; she wanted Mr. Purton to understand that it was not quite the thing for her to be seen standing talking to him in the middle of High Street, Shallerton — "and if you are walking that way,"—and they went on side by side in the most natural way possible.

"Will you take my arm?" said Mr. Purton.

"Oh, no, thank you, it's rather warm, and I did not know people ever took arms." Mr. Purton felt immeasurably rebuked. "Was that poor Mr. Blane's daughter I saw just now?" Mr. Purton

nodded. "She does remind me so"—Miss Wackstead's head inclined pensively to one side—"of my dear friend Lady Mary; something grand-looking, you know, but too large; wants paring."

Mr. Purton felt exalted. It was delightful to feel himself walking side by side with the dear friend of Lady Mary; he smacked his lips with the unctuousness of his satisfaction. What possible reason could there be against Robert's marriage with Miss Montgomery when his own companion was the friend of a Lady Mary.

A vision began to take shape in Mr. Purton's mind. Long ago he had set up a coat-of-arms and had caused a crest to be put on his plate and household appurtenances. He now saw that crest coupled with a real one, for he felt sure Miss Wackstead came of a real old family. How did he know what other

heraldic treasures might not be possessed by the fair creature of his affections — possessed by ancestral descent, no question of the herald's office and invention here. Mr. Purton seemed to tread on air.

Meantime Miss Wackstead was troubled. There had been many of these walks and talks with the rich timber-merchant, and they had hitherto ended, as this one seemed likely to end, in a courteous leave-taking at the cottage-gate.

People begin by wishing, then by asserting that which they wish, until they sometimes succeed in persuading themselves, like the unhappy old woman who "met a pedlar whose name was Trout," that they are not that which they supposed themselves to be.

Miss Wackstead had lived among gentlefolks until she thirsted to have gentle blood in her veins, and since she

had established herself at Shallerton had grown rapidly into the belief, which she instilled into Rizpah Blane, that she was a lady indeed.

Rizpah's blind worship never opened its eyes. Miss Wackstead looked and spoke like a lady, paid her way, and held herself above Miss Topper and such-like, and if she put a coronet on her letters who was to say she had not a right so to do. "She's got 'em on her pocket-handkerchiefs fast enough," Miss Blane had remarked to her niece; but Miss Wackstead had seen enough of the world and its ways to know how wonderfully skilled folks are in doing private detective business, and how very unsafe her own present position was in Shallerton—always supposing that she wished to marry Mr. Purton. She knew perfectly well that the timber-merchant was as much enamoured of her pretensions as

of herself, though she had never displayed the coronet to him, and yet she so fully believed in her own gentility that she had not quite made up her mind to accept Mr. Purton's offer when it came. She had not openly asserted her pretensions to him, she had spoken of happier times—different and more refined associations, and had plainly said that he was the only person in Shallerton she could tolerate as an equal.

But she had made a bolder stroke just now in speaking of her friend Lady Mary. Suppose Mr. Purton, who she knew was not restrained by any extra delicacy, should ask who was this Lady Mary, or should begin in any way to make inquiries: it would not be very difficult to trace Miss Wackstead to Mayfair, and once there—Miss Wackstead trembled as she thought of several kind friends, less charming than herself, who would soon inform Mr. Purton

of the post she had filled in the household of Lady Mary's father.

Miss Wackstead gave a little sigh; a little of the worry she had disclaimed acquaintance with clouded her eyes; resolution and determination were foreign to her character and therefore irksome; and yet she knew how often folks made or marred themselves by a ready seizing or missing of opportunity; if she let Mr Purton go to-day she might repent the doing it.

The reverie on both sides lasted till they reached the lane, and even weakness is stirred when it sees no escape.

Miss Wackstead had too much feminine tact to introduce a subject in the abrupt hurling fashion that might have been adopted by Miss Quintain. She knew that her last words had set Mr. Purton meditating on her friendship with Lady

Mary, and she took up the thread as if no pause of silence had come between.

"It is such a pity that young woman Nancy Blane should be so eccentric. I hear she is going away by herself again."

"Yes, it is a pity." Mr. Purton hesitated; it might not be quite proper to tell Miriam's story to so refined a lady, and besides, he did not wish to display any intimate knowledge of the affairs of the Blane family. Nancy was going to do the right thing, of course, but it was a pity that it had to be done. Miriam's disgrace must be shared by her sister; there was no use in any other way of looking at it. In Mr. Purton's private judgment it did not really much signify what Nancy Blane did in the way of conduct.

"Yes," he said again; he had sent his chin into the bosom of his shirt, and seemingly had got counsel there, for his next

words came out glibly. "She's what you may call strong-minded, and, perhaps, as she's left alone in the world, it's as well; but for my part, I don't think strength of any kind a woman's attribute."

"Oh, no!" they were near the cottage gate now, and yet there was not a shade of extra warmth in his manner—"and especially in this very thing of disregard of public opinion;" a little weak cough gave her time for thought; "I scarcely think, Mr. Purton, after what you said just now, that you will blame me if I say that I cannot follow in the steps of Nancy Blane."

Mr. Purton was utterly surprised; he looked in the face of his companion. It came almost level with his own, for Miss Wackstead was nearly as tall as Nancy, although much more slender and fragile. Miss Wackstead was blushing rosy red, and her eyes were downcast.

"I beg pardon," he said, abruptly, "but I don't see how that could ever be."

"Oh, don't you?" She raised her eyelashes, and shot one glance out of those soft blue eyes—a glance of beseeching wonder; then, as he waited for her explanation, she blushed again, and went on: "I only meant, you know, that people are foolish and spiteful in small country towns, and that really a woman cannot be too careful, especially when she is so wholly unprotected as I am."

Blushes notwithstanding, the blue eyes were turned helplessly on Mr. Purton. One might have thought Miss Wackstead was drowning, there was almost a despairing clutch in her gaze.

"Unprotected? Dear me, no; I should say quite the contrary. What have people been saying about you?" And then Mr. Purton became aware that some personal

relation existed between himself and Miss Wackstead's words.

"Really!" — a little pause here — "I think, do you know, that an unmarried lady is always unprotected, and perhaps— I am sure you will excuse my saying this" —she wriggled like a trodden worm—"but I scarcely think I ought to have so much of the pleasure of your society, much as I value it."

It was not only Miss Wackstead who blushed now. Mr. Purton grew red— redder yet—until at last he turned a crimson face to his companion. He blew his nose violently as a refuge from his embarrassments; it is an awkward sensation to blush at fifty. A man feels as if he ought to have laid that sort of thing by with other youthful follies, and is ashamed accordingly.

But it was clear that he must speak,

whether he had words ready or not. They had reached the cottage gate, and Miss Wackstead actually put her neatly-gloved hand on it, and yet her words proved that she had no intention of asking him in.

Mr. Purton felt that he must do the thing which of all others he most disliked—he must decide in a hurry. He had thought of this before, but he had made no decided plan of action, and yet contrary as it was to his invariable rule, he must decide on the spur of the moment —he must speak.

"Why need you give it up?" he blurted out; but at this Miss Wackstead's head erected itself, and there was an indication of outraged propriety in the portion of her face left visible by the movement. "I hardly think even Shallerton gossips would venture to comment on either of us; but even supposing they should"—here Mr. Purton

cleared his throat for the last effort—" they would soon be silenced if they heard that you had consented to make me the happiest of men."

Miss Wackstead's blushes grew overpowering. She pulled down her veil.

" In so public a place—so taken by surprise. I really——".

" Permit me." Mr. Purton was himself again now that there was something to plan and organize. He opened the little gate for Miss Wackstead to pass in, and followed her into the cottage.

It was the first time he had ventured unasked beyond the garden, and Miss Wackstead was in much inward trepidation; even as she walked up the garden-path it occurred to her that it might be well to have Rizpah Blane to live with her as chaperon till this affair was settled. Miss Wackstead had received

much admiration in the course of her life, and more than one romantic declaration of love; but this promised to be different, this was no mere love-affair, it was the beginning of a deliberate offer of marriage from a man of wealth and substantial property.

"It is the most serious moment of my life," thought the spinster.

Mr. Purton was actually doing the honours of her own house as if he were master there already.

"Won't you sit down?" He placed a chair for her and another for himself just opposite. A strong-minded female might have rebelled, but Miss Wackstead was too gentle, too soft and yielding, to struggle with her fate, and Mr. Purton gave her little time to struggle in.

"You must pardon me if I say"—he put his hat down on the ground between

his knees—"that you ought not to consider this a sudden idea on my part. I have been"—Mr. Purton sought hastily for a suitable expression — "pondering,—yes, actually pondering how to express my sentiments without ruffling that gentle delicacy which no one values more highly than I do. I may trust, may I not, that these sentiments have not offended"—here he took Miss Wackstead's hand—it lay in her lap all ready, she had pulled off her glove—"and that you will do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Miss Wackstead's face turned towards him. Some women do these things so gracefully, with such admirable control over the feelings, that, as they afterwards tell their friends, nearly overmastered them, and with all Miss Wackstead's helplessness she had quite the whip-hand over feeling to-day.

"Thank you," she said, sweetly, gently returning the pressure, and then she stole a soft look at her lover. "You really have taken me quite by surprise; but then you will probably not hurry me to reply to so momentous a question. You will give me time," she said.

But Mr. Purton felt that, having worked himself up to such a pitch, it was mere waste of time to leave the matter unfinished.

He again pressed the hand which still remained very contentedly in his.

"But if I do this," he said, "your own decision proves that I must give up the pleasure of your society till such time as you have decided. I am only, as you know, a plain man of business, and I don't pretend to set up my judgment against yours; but taking it as a matter of feeling, so far as I am concerned it would be a relief to know on the spot that your

answer was favourable." Here he squeezed her hand again and sighed, for he began to feel very much in love with this charming coy creature.

"Oh, Mr. Purton, how exacting you are; what am I to say?" and then with her other hand she put her handkerchief to her eyes.

Mr. Purton took this for consent, and he kissed the hand he held.

"Sweet creature"—this in sort of whisper, and then, as the hand was not withdrawn, he kissed Miss Wackstead's cheek.

She shook her head reprovingly.

"You must go now," she said, reproachfully; "it has all been too sudden, too unexpected for me. You must write me all you wish to say, and then I will tell you when you may come again."

CHAPTER III.

MIRIAM'S ANSWER.

NORAH asked for Mrs. Brendon, and she was shown into Myra's special sitting-room —Myra called it her boudoir. A pretty fanciful place, with canaries in gilded cages and a brilliant parrot chattering at a sleepy King Charles spaniel, which lay on a sky-blue cushion on the floor.

The spaniel had only shaken his long silky ears fretfully at the parrot's scoldings; but as soon as Norah appeared he got on his legs and greeted her with much delight, wagging his tail and jumping about for joy at the arrival of a reasonable companion.

"Poor thing." Norah was taking a

survey of the room. "I remark that mindless women always doat on pets."

It was necessary to harden herself as much as she could. Now that she found herself actually on the brink of this dreaded disclosure, it seemed to Norah as if she must have lost her senses. How had she consented to undertake that which she felt to be so wholly unsuited to her position?

"I ought not to have consented," she said, fretfully. And then she asked herself why she need do it after all? It was not unnatural that she should follow her young sister-in-law to ask the cause of her illness. She might go back and tell Robert Purton that the matter must be left to Nancy Blane.

Those two names destroyed the calm which had begun to return.

If Myra could be separated from Godfrey, then Nancy would marry Robert, for

Norah felt sure he had referred to himself, and her fears about Clara would be set at rest, and then Norah blushed with self-reproach. Was not her own child a stronger motive, and must not Godfrey Brendon's influence contaminate as long as he persevered in his present life; but still Norah did not think Godfrey as much injured as Myra. She was a sort of impossible person in all ways; quite as unfit to be Mrs. Brendon, as she was wrongly placed by Mr. Brendon's deception.

Norah's anger rose as she reflected on the deception that had been practised.

"He never said she was low-born," she thought bitterly, "and Mrs. Llewellyn has never been the same to me since I first pointed out Myra's want of breeding;" and then Norah smiled at her sister-in-law's bad taste; she had been kept waiting for her quite ten minutes.

The door opened and Mrs. Brendon came in. She was very pale—so nervous that her hand trembled in Norah's—and her blue eyes searched her visitor's face as if she were a naughty child, and feared punishment.

"I hope you are better?" Norah could not arrive at a beginning. Her dislike to Myra had increased so rapidly that she began to feel her business more and more impossible. The stiff unsympathetic manner reacted

"Oh, yes, I'm better, thank you. Was that your brother?" Myra gave a nervous little laugh. The poor girl felt as if her head were on fire, while her hands and feet were deadly cold.

But Norah's heart was steeled. It seemed to her that Myra was laughing at her brother, and the idea that such a person should venture to speak of her

family at all was unbearable. Possibly this ignorant girl looked on Spenser as a connection already.

"And so he is," thought Norah. She winced. "Oh, I must end it — it is all so false and wrong—I begin to see I ought to have spoken sooner." "There were two gentlemen"—she looked at Myra —"one was Mr. Robert Purton." Myra grew deadly white, but Norah looked away again. She could not say what she had to say if she suffered herself to be moved. "You know him, I believe?"

"I—" Myra stammered, and Norah feared she was going to deny the acquaintance.

"He knows your sister too, and so do I, Myra."

The floor seemed to fall away under Myra's feet. This woman, whom she disliked with all the strength of her weak

nature, knew her story then. She forgot Godfrey's counsel; she was so utterly ashamed of her own origin that she had no power to take the course left open to her. She was only desperately angry with Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn for coming to torment her in this way. Her ideas were utterly confused, for her agitation grew every moment; and her next words sprang from her lips as the frightened deer springs from the edge of a cliff.

"There must be some mistake," she said; "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you will understand when I explain,"—that soft clear tone in Norah's voice irritated every nerve in her listener's body—"I have seen your sister; she went to Brazil to find you, but you had left for England, so she came back. She wants to see you very much."

Myra's face had flushed deeply, but

still she was perplexed and troubled. When she left Shallerton Nancy had been a helpless sort of girl in the way of deciding for herself; she had always let Miriam settle everything. It sounded quite unreal and improbable that Nancy should have crossed the ocean just to see her.

"I don't understand at all; I am sure there's some mistake." Her voice came feebly, and she knew it—knew too the contrast between her own confusion and Norah's calmness.

"I think not; I have a message to give you from her; you may know it already"—she hesitated and looked keenly at the lovely blushing face, and even then Norah was obliged to confess that there was no want of refinement in those delicate features—"it is about your marriage."

Myra rose up; strength came back to her; this was open, safe ground.

"Really, Mrs. Llewellyn,"—her voice had a resentment in it that stirred Norah's blood, and made her wish herself at home again—"I think my marriage is not a suitable subject for discussion."

"You quite misunderstand me"—Norah spoke as to an inferior—"you had better sit down and keep yourself quiet. I came here to-day much against my own judgment, and I see I was right. I came to do you a service at your sister Nancy's request."

She said the name purposely, and she saw in Myra's sudden drooping looks that any hope of subterfuge had left her.

"I scarcely know how to tell you, but your sister wants to save you from a life of disgrace."

"Disgrace!" Myra's eyes flashed, and

she smiled in such utter unbelief that Norah melted at last. The girl was really innocent then; Godfrey had wilfully deceived her.

"I am very sorry to tell you that when Mr. Brendon asked you to marry him he acted very wrongly; he had a wife living; he was married."

Norah could not look up as she spoke—she had sat still—but Myra had remained standing.

For an instant the dreadful words fell into the girl's heart like lead, and held her still—lifeless—then her love brought back the blood in a torrent that flamed up in her cheeks; her eyes sparkled through indignant tears.

"It's a lie! How dare you come here with such a falsehood? you would not say it before Godfrey, you know you would not, you cruel, spiteful woman!"

She broke down in a passion of tears and sobs.

Her words did not irritate Norah; it seemed to her natural that this low-born girl should speak in such a moment of overwrought feeling, after the fashion of her class.

"It is very hard for you, to believe, but it is true; and if you were to ask Mr. Brendon I do not think he would deny it. Nancy asked me to tell you she would come and fetch you home, and Mr. Robert Purton said just now that you and she can go to his farm at once if you like."

Myra stood looking at Norah: the words were slowly making themselves plain to her, bringing conviction with them.

She grew white and quiet, but not one bit abashed. Her spirit was rising against this persecution. She felt betrayed by

every one. Nancy, her own devoted sister, had joined with Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn to publish this disgrace, and to tell it to Robert Purton.

"How do I know they have stopped there?"—Myra's eyes lit up with sudden fire, and a vision of Miss Topper and her gossips came to her mind—for the post-mistress's parlour was an old Shallerton institution. The last tie was snapped between herself and her people. Even if she had not loved Godfrey with all the strength she had, she would have clung to him now.

"Nancy and Robert Purton may leave me alone; they will not take me away from my husband; their story may be true or false, but I am married to Mr. Brendon, whatever you or any one else may say, Mrs. Llewellyn."

"But"—Norah was terribly distressed,

she seemed to have done more harm than good—"we all know that; we all think that you are quite innocent in the matter; it is only Godfrey who has acted wrongly."

"Hush"—Myra was still pale, but Norah was surprised by the dignity she assumed—"I will not hear one word against my husband. You can tell Nancy that she has treated me very cruelly. She should have come to me herself; she should not have sent me such a message as this by any one—certainly not by you, who have never liked me, who have always despised me. No, Mrs. Llewellyn."—She shook her head at Norah's interruption.—"Don't make any false professions; you are not sorry for me; you are glad of this excuse for separating me from Godfrey, as you think, but you will be disappointed; he is all I have in the world, and I will never leave him—never."

Her anger got beyond control. The passion with which the last words were spoken loosed the hold her quiet manner had imposed on Norah.

"Myra," she said earnestly, "you are angry now, but you cannot really mean what you say. You cannot go on living with Godfrey now that you know you are not his wife."

"I do not know it yet. I have only your word for it." The girl looked contemptuously in Norah's mild reproving eyes. "It may be all false; I will only believe if he says it is true."

"He must say so, I fear; and then, my poor girl, you will not stay with him. You could not accept such a life of wilful sin."

"Oh! pray don't preach, I don't want advice." The long repressed dislike of her sister-in-law had got free; she had no

discovery to fear now. It seemed to her wonderful that she had ever felt in awe of this cold artificial woman, so bent on tormenting her. "You are not my mother, and I don't want to hear what you think. I am utterly indifferent to your opinion, and it seems to me a pity you should force it on me."

Norah flushed deeply; it did seem very hard that she should have been brought into a scene so repugnant to her taste and feelings.

"I am doing no good, and I am only exposing myself to annoyance," she thought.

She rose up from her chair.

"I wish you to understand that no choice of mine brought me here to-day. I came simply to fulfil an unpleasant duty at your sister's request. She was quite mistaken in you; she thought you would have been different about this; she even thought

that the delay of a few days signified so much that she asked me to speak to you before she comes back from Shallerton."

"She is coming then?"

"I expect her very soon now."

"There is no more to be said." Myra looked out of window; she began to think she would ring and order Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn out of the house if she did not go soon.

But Norah was in haste to go.

"I hope you may see things differently." She said this as she went out.

Myra did not answer.

CHAPTER IV.

MONEY OR POSITION.

CLARA had taken no notice of her father's discomfiture. She had followed him silently, so as to let his anger evaporate, and then she had turned the conversation to home affairs. She had always been his confident with respect to money matters. Mr. Montgomery had been unusually frank on this subject; he wished his child to grow up in a conviction of the necessity that existed for her to marry a man of large fortune.

Lately he had been speculating in some foreign shares, and Clara inquired how these were succeeding?

Her father's answer told her much more than he meant her to understand.

"My dear! don't ask questions, especially on such wholly unfeminine subjects. Women should know the value of money, and strive to economize it in every possible way; but they should never betray knowledge on this or any other subject. I have no objection to a woman being clever, Clara, as you know; but cleverness is just one of those things men only care to reap the benefit of. They never wish to see it displayed by a woman. One enjoys an omelette, my dear"—he softened here with a twinge of conscience at his own injustice—"but one does not care to know anything about the frying-pan which produced it."

Mr. Montgomery looked very self-complacent. He never could see the force of humour in others, and rarely tried a

joke himself; but when he did he felt elated and looked round for applause.

Clara laughed.

"And yet, papa, you don't carry that argument through life. For instance, you are not content with money as money, without troubling about its source."

"You mistake," her father spoke stiffly; "if I understand your allusion correctly, the point in question is not money at all, it is a matter of social position."

Here his hair and shirt-collar, and everything about him, assumed so very unbending an aspect that Clara kept silence. She did not feel any awe in her heart; she laughed at what she called her father's "high stilts" and "nonsense;" but she saw that he would require more than usual management, and she was determined to conquer him. They met Mrs. Llewellyn as they came back.

"I could not think what had become of you all," the old lady said; "I had not a notion you would all go away and leave my friend, Robert Purton, alone—even Hugh has gone off somewhere."

Clara knew that Mrs. Llewellyn was the best advocate she could have with her father.

"I'll go and find Hugh." She hurried on to the cottage.

"Is that person—Mr. Burton, or Purton, I think you said he was—still here?" Mr. Montgomery quickened his pace.

"No, oh! no, and don't walk so fast, please; even if Robert Purton were still at the cottage"—she gave a mischievous look at her companion—"I don't think either he or Clara would want our help in entertaining one another, do you know?"

"Really"—Mr. Montgomery spoke politely, but with much deprecation—"I

scarcely see that any intimacy can exist between Clara and this Mr. Purton, which can make them suitable as companions. He is, no doubt, a very honest, worthy young man, but not quite an acquaintance for Clara, I think."

Mrs. Lllewellyn felt choleric. "Well, he's a capital young fellow, and his father is the richest man in Shallerton; you know best, of course." Her pace quickened; she had never been able to agree with Spenser Montgomery, and his folly about Robert Purton was exasperating.

"How dares he remonstrate with me on Clara's acquaintance, made under my own roof? Thereby implying"—the old lady kept these wrathful thoughts to herself—"that Robert Purton is not a fit acquaintance for me; but I've not done with you, Mr. Spenser Montgomery."

If she had known how Spenser Mont-

gomery's temper was soured by the loss of the foreign shares, and how hard a battle he was fighting mentally, as to the possibility of considering the "honest worthy young man" in the light of a son-in-law, she would have felt more hopeful about her project. His next words made her more contradictory.

"Granted all you say, I think people can hardly be too careful in these days of radicalism and free-thinking of every kind, in keeping up the old landmarks of class distinction."

"You must excuse me,"—Mrs. Llewellyn spoke in a tone which justified her companion in deciding that she was a disagreeable old woman,—"but you see, in the first place, I am a liberal myself, and in the next I know nothing about class distinctions. You forget my father was a merchant."

"Ah! but," Spenser Montgomery felt uncomfortably that his own wife's father had had quite as much to do with trade as Mr. Purton had, "I am speaking of the country."

"It is just the same thing,"—Mrs. Llewellyn spoke irritably—"except that your country folk have no cockney sharpness to get rid of, or any of the offensive uppishness of some London men of business. I believe that young man's father is worth more than a hundred thousand pounds, and Robert has money besides, which came to him from his mother." Here Mrs. Llewellyn's self-control left her abruptly. "I tell you what, Mr. Montgomery, that young man admires Clara, and she likes him, but there are plenty of folks ready to snap Robert Purton up for their daughters. Don't come to a hasty conclusion about him; he will never need

to break his heart in trying to get a wife; he is coming again to-morrow to look at one of my ponies, so you will have an opportunity of appreciating him."

It seemed to Norah quite time to interfere in this conversation, of which stray words reached her in the drawing-room.

"Are you not afraid of staying out so late?" she went forward to Mrs. Llewellyn.

Mr. Montgomery was grateful to his sister. He stayed out by himself; he wanted a cigar, and he walked up and down beside the plashing unquiet little river.

He began to ask himself why this marriage would be so much worse for Clara than his own had been.

"Yes, it is much worse," he said fretfully. "A woman always takes the position her husband occupies, that is, unless he is weak enough to sink to her level;

besides, I stooped in order to bring money into the family, and to benefit any children I might have. I will not permit Clara to throw away the advantages I have given her—women are such fools—a man must have tone and manner and breeding if he is to get on in society; and what is life without position and mixing in society of a good class?—certainly not worth having."

Mr. Montgomery's notions of himself were not founded on fact. He found no pleasure at home, and, therefore, society was perhaps a necessity to him; but his method of entering into it was hardly to be considered enjoyment; it was a series of discontents and heartburnings, and unmitigated contempt for a world which gave so undue a place to mere money. He knew very well if he would only have been real in his self-communing, that he was often obliged to associate with men far below

Robert Purton, both in birth and breeding, men whose want of education and refinement was just lacquered over by the polish they had gained in mixing with their betters; but then this polish, or, as Mr. Montgomery would have called it, "knowledge of the ways of society," was just the one indispensable Shibboleth not to be compensated for by any wealth of goodness or moral or mental qualities whatsoever. He had trained Clara to fill a good position, and she must occupy it.

"I am not going to see all the time and money I have spent flung away just because she has taken this absurd liking for a clodhopper, and because that presuming old woman ventures to dictate to me. I'm afraid the tradesman element has descended to Clara, or she could not have taken such a fancy; and yet she is a thorough Montgomery; the element must

be stamped out; the next generation must be thorough-bred."

And then Mr. Montgomery reckoned up his daughter's admirers, and tried to discover a satisfactory son-in-law among them. It was mortifying to find that this young country fellow was not only much more presentable, but, from all he heard, likely to be far wealthier, as he was certainly much better-looking, than any of them.

"If it were not for those swindling shares there would be no hurry," — he looked more discontented still,—"but I don't see why we are to be sacrificed to Clara. She is a great expense; she really must make up her mind to marry as soon as she goes back to town."

CHAPTER V.

JEALOUSY.

GRIEF is said to soften the heart, but it has a strange power of deadening the force of love to the living. It seems sacrilege towards our lost one that the heart should occupy itself with any other; and though in rebound, our love will come back with intense fervour, yet in the time of actual bereavement we are cold to all but our buried love.

Till she met Robert with Clara Montgomery, Nancy had not known the bitterness of disappointment, because hope had lingered more closely than she knew—even then she had resolved not to doubt—

she would trust to Robert's love; and then had come the sharp heart-wrenching anguish of parting from her father. In her sorrow Nancy had reproached herself for the love she had given away from him; if she had known how soon her father was to leave her, it seemed to her she should have devoted all her thoughts and love to him only. She reproached herself for having left him as much as she lately had done, forgetting that Matthew had expressly sent her forth on both her fruitless journeys.

Was this present journey to be alike fruitless? Nancy asked herself this question after she parted from Mr. Purton. Why should she expose herself to the mortification which she knew awaited her at Mrs. Llewellyn's cottage for such a doubtful chance.

While she stood face to face with Mr.

Purton, Nancy had not believed him. The half-concealed triumph in the timber-merchant's face had roused her indignation, and it is hard to accept defeat in such a mood.

But it was different when she turned away. For a few moments, as she walked on quickly towards the station, her spirit was still sustained by the impulse which had spoken in her parting words, but as she travelled alone to Sparmouth she went over Mr. Purton's words with the justice she always dealt to everything.

Mr. Purton would not have made this assertion without foundation, and then, to give reality to his words, came the bitter vision of Robert as she had last seen him, listening intently with so pleased a face to Miss Montgomery.

Even yet it seemed to Nancy she could not give him up—and then came a quick

flush of shame. How could she think of forcing herself upon Robert? She had at first given up his love of her own free will; she had told herself it would be much better for his happiness if he forgot her and chose a wife with no stain attached to her name, for Nancy could not yet shake off the feeling that Miriam's unhappy story must cast its shadow over the rest of the family.

"That is just what he has done; why do I feel disappointed? for it is not for myself only I am sorry," she said to herself as she leaned back in the railway-carriage —"it is for him; can he be happy with a fine lady?"

She had travelled alone for some distance, but at the last station two persons had got into the carriage—they were evidently husband and wife.

Nancy's attention was roused out of her

engrossing thoughts by the lady's way of speaking to her husband. She was a small, pretty, doll-like woman, and the man was rough and huge, with great red ungloved hands, and hobnailed boots, but it seemed to Nancy that he was the gentlest, most devoted of husbands; the more exacting and fault-finding the little woman grew, the more anxious he was to pacify and please her.

"Yes" — Nancy's thoughts went on blending in, as thoughts are apt to blend outward suggestions with the main thread working in the brain—"who would have said this fretful silly woman could make that poor rough fellow happy, and yet she must be able to do it or he would treat her differently. And this Miss Montgomery, with her fashionable grand ways, may be just what Robert wants. How can I tell? a man never marries his first love—at

least folks say so—and I think I was the first Robert cared for."

She stifled a sob; her heart ached more and more heavily. She asked why this sorrow had been laid on her? Why was her life to be always a sacrifice to others?

Nancy sighed at her own discontent. What was her trial beside Miriam's.

She knew her own love well enough to be sure that it could never take fresh root; it did not matter who Robert married, Nancy told herself she must always love him. In her struggling dumb anguish she could not even now cherish a hard thought of him, but she went no farther; she could not picture him and Clara Montgomery side by side without a quick writhe of pain.

"I must hate her, God forgive me for saying it; it may pass away, but I must hate her now."

She would have moaned aloud if she had been alone, but her strong will kept up an outward calm before her companions.

Her face had grown pale, and the man had, from time to time, given her a compassionate glance.

Nancy met one of these glances; it was so full of sympathy that she felt her lips quiver beyond all power of steadying them. When the train stopped at a little inland station, a short distance from Sparmouth, she got out; she felt as if she must be alone with her thoughts.

As she got out the pretty woman's querulous voice began, but Nancy walked away too quickly to hear her words.

"What a great dull-looking young woman—what took your fancy in her, John? I saw you looking at her ever so many times. I'm sure she was no beauty.

I can't think what took you in her," she ended pouting.

" I never thought about her looks," the man spoke thoughtfully; he was still watching Nancy as she walked away. " She's a well-grown lass, and walks like a queen; but she's in sore trouble, that young woman is. There was a kind of sob in her face just now, poor soul."

The wife laughed.

" Bless us, John, who'd have thought of you being sentimental? men think themselves so wise for seeing things, and never see the reasons for them. Now I didn't trouble about your beauty's face, because I saw it wasn't worth looking at. Dark-haired women never have any complexion, and there can't be beauty without complexion, John, whatever you may think. I saw the young woman was in deep

mourning, and people in mourning ought to be sorry, it's their duty."

Her husband shook his head; he did not argue out the question, but he felt that the struggle he had seen in the pale dark-eyed face was not the hushed sorrow of a mourner for the dead.

Meantime Nancy's thoughts had been diverted by the necessity for asking her nearest way to the river path.

A man trudging along with a huge faggot on his shoulder answered her question.

But now that no obstacle lay in her path, Nancy wavered; she stood still, looking at the way the man had pointed out.

Why should she go on? There was no home to take Miriam to, and Miriam might refuse to listen even if she saw her. Why should she, for this doubtful chance of rescuing her sister, expose herself to

the humiliation of again seeing Robert and Miss Montgomery together?

"And I may not escape notice this time. No, I cannot bear to see Robert look at me without love in his face."

CHAPTER VI.

TRUE.

GODFREY BRENDON stood leaning one arm on the mantelpiece of Myra's sitting-room. He was frowning so heavily that his eyes scarcely showed under the lowered brows; the movement of his moustaches showed how angrily he was biting his lower lip.

Myra sat still, white as death. She had told Godfrey unfalteringly the whole story of Norah's visit, and now she sat waiting his answer.

The poor girl had no hope left. Godfrey's sudden start, his suppressed oath, and then this still frowning silence, had told

her that the story was a true one, that she was not Godfrey's lawful wife. And yet, in her suspense, Myra felt no anger against her betrayer; there was no change in her love, only an agonized fear, lest he too should turn against her and cast her off.

The silence went on. Anger and shame were battling fiercely in Godfrey Brendon; he was even angry with Myra, that she should have brought this struggle home to him.

"Well," the words came at last hoarsely enough, "did Norah say where she raked up this precious news?"

"No;" Myra crouched lower in her chair; "but oh! Godfrey, don't speak so angrily, please don't. I've done no harm. What have I done to make you angry?"

"You!" His eyes opened and he looked fully at her, but he did not go up to her;

he stood still leaning against the mantel-shelf.

Myra burst into tears; she could not see that the man was so overcome with shame and vexation that he had no power to realize her feelings. She only thought he was tired of her and was going to send her away.

"Do you want to leave me, child?" he said, and then he smiled at himself for the question. He knew that he could not be parted from her, that wrongly or rightly she was necessary to him and therefore must be his.

But Myra did not yet realize her power.

In the dread of losing him she forgot herself completely. He was her all on earth, and Myra had given herself to earthly idolatry. She had worshipped herself and her own beauty, and now she worshipped Godfrey. Life without him

would be death, so her passionate misery pictured; it seemed to her she was sinking away from life into death, and the next moment she had clasped her arms round Godfrey.

"Do you want me to go? if you do I must, because I will never disobey you; but remember, if you send me away it is to die, for I cannot live without you."

She looked at him earnestly; her eyes were full of pleading sorrow. He had expected anger and bitter reproaches; in those few minutes Godfrey Brendon was nearer goodness than he had been since his boyhood. Just then he loved Myra really and unselfishly.

"You are an angel, bless you;" and then he held her away from him, and looked down in her face. "I had no actual right to marry you, darling, but the woman has a vile temper, and we were miserable

together; she left me willingly. Till just now I thought I had a right to hold you against the world, but you shall decide it; if you can't forgive me, then I will see that you have fit means of living without me. Do you wish to leave me, Myra?"

She struggled to be free, and he loosed his hold. But she only came closer to him, and clung to his arm convulsively.

"No, no; I don't know what is right; it may be wrong to stay with you, but then it must be more right to make you happy than to please Norah and Nancy. Oh, Godfrey, my own darling, I really am married to you. I shall die if I go away."

He still kept a strong control over himself; he thought he was doing his duty to the utmost if he left Myra free and unbiassed; as to being stronger than she was, and helping the weak distracted girl against

her passionate devotion, Godfrey Brendon would have considered this quixotic and absurd.

"You must decide for us both," he said, gravely. "I have wronged you once, but I will do now whatever you wish; but remember that you are deciding our lives; there will be no going back afterwards."

A vision swam across Myra's sight. Herself, a few years on, deserted by Godfrey, because she was not lawfully his wife; if she left him now, no one could blame her, and then she thought of Norah's cold superior manner. If she left Godfrey she gave up all hope of happiness, to be despised by every one. She would not think of Nancy. There was such household treason in thus joining with Norah against her that Myra considered Nancy quite another being from the sister of whom she had cherished a compassionate, patron-

izing remembrance, and she had meant to be so good to Nancy. She recollected now, with one of those spasms of memory which surprise us with our own forgetfulness, that before she sailed she had resolved that her first act on reaching England should be the sending an anonymous gift to Nancy. Myra always shrank from the thought of her father. She still loved him well enough to feel she had been undutiful.

She looked up in Godfrey's face.

"I don't want to go back; who have I to go to who will love me as you do? You do love me still, don't you, darling?" This came with sudden wistful tenderness. "I can't help it if it isn't right. I did not begin wrongly with you, and now it seems to me the worst is done. Nothing can ever make me Miriam Blane again. No one will ever respect me again if I leave

you now this minute, and oh, Godfrey"—this came in a piteous wailing cry—"I shall die if I leave you."

A truer, better man might have saved her, but Godfrey Brendon had lived too long to self to withstand such an appeal. As it was, every pulse was throbbing beyond endurance. In this agony of suspense the veins on his temples showed, and his face had grown suffused. At Myra's last words his arms closed round her, and his chest heaved as if his breath came back at last.

"You are mine now for ever," he said, triumphantly. "No one shall come between us, I defy them."

He laughed, but the sound troubled Myra. She was pressed close to Godfrey's heart; she was assured of his unchanged love, and yet her own heart sank like lead. She could not deafen herself

to the whisper which urged her yet to leave him.

"Darling,"—her voice was feeble and broken—"it is right to stay with you if I make you happy."

Just that real fear of losing her was what Godfrey Brendon needed to rouse his usual recklessness.

He stopped her mouth with kisses; he told her he would not hear another word.

"Not another word. You have decided, my pet, and what we both feel to be right must be right. We will leave this hateful place to-morrow, and go far enough away from all these canting fools."

To go away from Fernside—to be once more alone with Godfrey, was not that joy? Myra asked herself why her heart was still heavy. Why did not these words fill her with the rapture they would have given only

so short a while ago, when she had asked this favour of him, and he had refused? But Godfrey was looking at her, looking impatient of her serious face, and for the first time Myra had to force smiles to her lips, and affect a joy she had no spirits for.

CHAPTER VII.

MOTHER AND SON.

NORAH had gone out walking with her brother. Mrs. Llewellyn was alone with Clara in the little drawing-room when Godfrey Brendon was announced.

His mother's smile faded out of her face at the storm in his. His eyes were hidden under a heavy frown, and he spoke harshly and abruptly.

"I want to speak to you alone, mother."

"What a boor that man is," Clara thought. "Really, with all aunt Norah's nonsense, she is right in thinking him a bad companion for Hugh"—she gathered up her work and went away.

"Mother"—the agitation in his voice alarmed Mrs. Llewellyn—"I am come to say good-by."

"Good-by! Where are you going, and where is Myra?"

"I don't know where we shall go, and I should not tell you if I did. You have only that precious daughter-in-law of yours to thank for everything; from the very beginning she has ill-treated Myra; she has always patronized and condescended as if she were made of different clay, and yesterday she insulted her grossly. No, mother, don't take Norah's part; you have been all that is kind and loving, and it is hard to give up Hugh too; but remember, if the boy chooses to stand by me against his mother, let him. He'll always find a home ready for him."

Mrs. Llewellyn's wits were recovering from the surprise which had held them.

She went up to her son and put one hand on his shoulder.

"Godfrey, I don't understand; there must be a mistake. Norah may have been silly, poor thing. She has silly notions sometimes, but she is incapable of such rudeness as you speak of; Myra must have fancied it. My dear boy, you must not expect that little wife of yours to be faultless."

Brendon's face had softened, but at the mention of Myra his anger came back.

"There is no use in any argument, mother: Norah will tell you that. I could not allow Myra to see her again. I will not see her again myself. I could not answer for what I might be tempted to say. Mother, I am very sorry to go—I can't bear to go away from you so soon—but you must bid me good-by. I will write to you; think as well as you can of me, and don't let Hugh forget me."

His words came in abrupt sentences, as if he found them hard to speak. He put his arms round his mother, and kissed her warmly, so much more warmly than usual, that the foreboding his face had roused again stirred Mrs. Llewellyn.

All her strength of motherhood rose to combat the unknown danger that seemed to threaten in her son's words, and her clear sense told her his manner showed that the parting was to be a long one; Godfrey would not break up his home in this sudden way just to avoid Norah.

She took hold of both her son's arms, and looked earnestly in his face.

"I shall not let you go like this, Godfrey: you are keeping back something—I can see it in your eyes, my boy; if not, I ask you if it is just or right to run away from me again, just when I have learned to value your presence? What is Norah

to you or me, Godfrey? I have no wish to force her on you, although naturally it would make me happier if you could agree. But then I have lived long enough, my dear boy, to know that little outside differences will keep people far wider apart than real questions of right and wrong. What you forget is that this cottage is mine, and that certainly I am mistress in it; and also, I must tell you, however much you dislike her, Norah is too amiable to be any hindrance to our intercourse."

Godfrey freed himself as soon as he could. His dread was that his mother should learn the story of his false marriage before he got away from Fernside. He loved her so dearly that it was suffering for her to know this. He shrank too from the stern, uncompromising view which he knew she would take of it. If he stayed at Fernside he believed that his mother

would separate him from Myra. This thought came to him now, and quickened his resolution.

"I cannot say more than this, and I think it is reason enough for a man who cares for his wife. I tell you, Norah has behaved unjustifiably towards Myra; it is impossible they can both remain here, therefore we must go. I will come back and see you, mother"—the yearning in her eyes was moving him strangely—"don't think I am never coming back. I hate saying good-by, there"—he placed her in a chair and kissed her again—"now say, 'God bless you,' and I'm off."

"May God bless you, my boy,"—the words came back to her lips like the sound of an echo, even after she had heard the click of the little gate—and again Mrs. Llewellyn asked herself what all this meant; and once more that strange

feeling which stirs the whole being when it comes with an awe which we know is the presence of Truth, whispered to her that this had been a last parting from Godfrey —she should never see him again.

She sprang to her feet in sudden terror. She ran out into the garden, but he was already out of sight.

"I was asleep—senseless," she said; "if I had spoken more firmly Godfrey would not have disobeyed me."

She went to her room, snatched at the first cloak and bonnet she could find, and started off with breathless speed to Fernside.

Mr. Montgomery and Norah were coming in at the opposite gate in the criss-cross fence. Norah had seen Hugh coming through the wood from his tutor's, and she waited for him; but Mr. Montgomery faced the garden, and he saw Mrs. Llewellyn going out of it with unusual speed.

"Norah," he said, as soon as his sister joined him—it did not occur to him to go back to her—"has anything unusual happened to your mother-in-law?"

"Why?"—the colour she had gained in her walk fled out of Norah's face—ever since yesterday she had been dreaming that some consequence must arise from her interview with Myra; and as our first feeling is usually connected with our most habitual failing, Norah's thought now was a shrinking from the scene which she feared was in store for her with Mrs. Llewellyn. She knew that her mother-in-law would judge her son's conduct as hardly as she herself did. But Mrs. Llewellyn loved Myra; in her heart Norah thought that a mutual want of refinement helped sympathy between these two.

"And if she does take Myra's part, she

cannot blame me. I am very sorry for the girl."

But conscience would not be quieted. Norah knew that if she had not cherished dislike to Godfrey's wife she might have helped her yesterday against herself. She tried to silence self-reproach by telling herself that this dislike had been well founded—that Myra's shameful resolution to stay with Godfrey Brendon was positive proof of a bad, low nature. These thoughts had followed Norah through the past evening, and now her brother's words seemed a bugle-call which brought them all thronging back to torment her.

No one knew better the value of manner; how powerful an instrument it may be in winning hearts, or in alienating them; and this very knowledge was burning itself into her heart as she hurried after Mrs. Llewellyn.

She met Clara at the gate, beyond the gravelled path.

"What is the matter, aunt? Why, you look quite ill and frightened."

"Don't stop me," Norah spoke breathlessly; "I want to overtake Mrs. Llewellyn!"

"Mrs. Llewellyn is in-doors. Mr. Brendon is there too, but you must not go to them. He actually ordered me out of the room."

Clara had stood before her aunt while she spoke, but Norah pushed quietly past her.

She seemed to know by instinct that evil was happening at Fernside, and the sense of wrong-doing against which she had been striving urged her on to prevent the mischief. She did not know what she dreaded, but she shrank from family discord, and it seemed to her that much lay

before her. She felt as if the dark cloud which had hung over Fernside since she had listened to Nancy Blane's story, had suddenly burst, crushing all who came beneath its scope. It was a mood so unlike her usual calm gentle way of life, that even as she hurried along Norah accused herself of exaggeration and vehemence.

"I could not sleep for thinking of that poor girl, and I suppose I am morbid."

This was all the explanation she gave herself.

She went in at the Fernside entrance, through which she had taken Nancy on the day of the meeting with Godfrey Brendon. Perhaps if Nancy had told her story then, Godfrey might have been brought to reason, he might have allowed the sisters to meet. And Myra would have listened to Nancy. She would have had no prejudice against her.

Norah rang at the door-bell several times before she could get her summons answered.

At last Myra's maid appeared: the girl had her bonnet on.

"Is Mrs. Llewellyn here?" Norah asked, with a sick feeling at her heart.

"Mrs. Llewellyn have been and gone ma'am; she went directly she found Mr. and Mrs. Brendon was gone. I don't think it's fair usage, ma'am, to be turned off in this sudden way; wages don't make up for having to seek a home anyhow. I'd never have engaged myself, that I wouldn't," she added with a sudden burst of pertness, "if I'd dreamed of such ways."

Norah dared not ask questions. She trembled lest the truth should be known, and when she thought of Godfrey's headstrong impetuous temper it seemed too probable.

"And it may reach Hugh's ears—to

think that he should know of such a disgrace!"

Norah went home again slowly and sadly. How often she had wished the Brendons far away from Fernside, and now she longed as ardently that they could be there again, free from this cloud of shame and sorrow.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MEETING.

HUGH did not think much of his uncle Spenser; he rarely sent him or gave a "tip;" he took no interest in either cricket or the ponies, the chief amusements of Hugh's life; and, besides these defects, "uncle Spenser had such 'muffish' white hands."

"He's altogether a different sort of fellow to uncle Godfrey"—Hugh gave a side-glance at Mr. Montgomery; "there's no go in him. He feels like a lump of ice in the house; he seems ready to find fault about everything."

"What's become of my mother, uncle? I thought she was with you."

"She went after Mrs. Llewellyn, but I don't think she wants you, Hugh."

Mr. Montgomery said this in a checking voice. Hugh had started off for the gate; he stopped, but his face was rebellious.

"Such confounded rubbish! I particularly want my mother; why can't she leave grandmother alone? Women are so fond of getting together."

His cheeks had got scarlet, and he looked at his uncle with a scornful air of superior wisdom. Mr. Montgomery did not condescend even to rebuke him, and Hugh felt goaded.

"What a horrid bother!" his self-control had not strengthened under his uncle Godfrey's influence. "I wonder how long she'll be gone; it's such lines for a fellow to have to waste a half-holiday like this.

Hullo, there's Clara! Clara, will you come out riding?"

"I don't know"—Clara looked at her father. "What are you going to do, papa?"

Miss Montgomery's sudden dutifulness was hardly genuine. She knew that Robert Purton was coming to the cottage, and she thought her father was quite capable of affronting him, if they met without her restraining presence.

"I am going to read the paper; but are these ponies fit for a lady, Clara?" he said doubtfully.

"I should think they just are." Hugh's words came tumbling out with indignation. "Why, Clara rides one of them every day; they go capitally, don't they?" He looked at his cousin impetuously.

"I trust, Clara, you never ride out alone?" Mr. Montgomery seemed so

alarmed that his nephew could scarcely keep from laughing. "Oh! you jolly old prig," he said to himself; but he stood listening for Clara's answer; he was curious to see whether his cousin had the same "upper hand," as he called it, over his uncle, that she had over every one else.

"I must sometimes, or I should lose half my riding." Clara spoke very calmly. "I really don't think it signifies in a quiet place like this."

Mr. Montgomery was seriously displeased; he seemed to be suddenly drawn down into an inferior atmosphere, where people acted as they thought fit, without regard for society and her requirements.

"Propriety is always of consequence, Clara; pray don't do such an ill-bred thing again; far better not to ride at

all. Could not Mr. Brendon lend you a servant? I should imagine there is more than one groom at Fernside."

"Oh! yes, there are plenty, and I could have ridden with Mr. Brendon himself; but I like the freedom of being alone; it is much pleasanter, unless one can have quite a congenial companion."

Hugh flushed up to his hair.

"Do you mean to say, Clara, that you find Robert Purton a better fellow for riding than uncle Godfrey? I'm sure you like riding with *him*."

Clara could hardly keep from laughing at her father's face; it became grotesque in its expression of outraged pride. But Mr. Montgomery kept silence before Hugh; he disliked boys: they were noisy and disorderly and obtrusive, and Norah's boy seemed to him to be a very uncultivated lad indeed.

Clara had blushed, but she answered with her usual coolness.

"I like your uncle Godfrey well enough, Hugh, but I never make up my mind beforehand as to what I shall do, and while I am sending up to Fernside I am kept waiting for my ride, and then I may, perhaps, interfere with your aunt Myra's arrangements."

Hugh's face cleared. Boys are far more obtuse and are also more easily appeased than girls are.

"Then you don't really like Robert better than uncle Godfrey? Do you know," he said confidentially, ignoring the presence of his uncle Spenser, who stood with his hands behind his back contemplating vacancy on the hillside opposite—really he was listening to every word—"I thought you cared more for Robert than any of us did, and I couldn't make it

out; he's a jolly fellow enough, and he knows about ponies and dogs and rabbits, but there's not much fun in him, is there?"

Clara wished Hugh safely across the river.

"I thought you asked me to ride with you, Hugh? Do you or don't you want me to go?"

"Of course I do, but you gave me no answer; I'm ready now. Look sharp or I'll have the ponies round before you are anything like ready."

Clara was thankful to get away. She was puzzled at her own cowardice, and yet it was not her father's anger that she shrank from so much as the strange shyness and confusion that mastered her at the mention of Robert Purton.

"Ridiculous! I could strike myself for being such a noodle." She was standing before her looking-glass putting on her hat, and was glad of the shade it gave.

"Blushing as if I were a school-girl! but it is Norah's fault: it is the remembrance of that discussion that makes me silly and self-conscious."

It was a relief to find that her father had left the garden. Mr. Montgomery was too angry to bear the presence of any one; he felt like a lion in a net; it seemed to him that the acquaintance between this young farmer and his daughter must have gone farther than he could have imagined, if even Hugh ventured to tease Clara about Mr. Purton. And yet with his anger was mingled a secret curiosity to see this aspiring suitor again; for to Mr. Montgomery's mind Robert Purton, the only son of a rich father, was quite a different being from the "worthy young man" he had snubbed yesterday. Mr. Montgomery had walked into the wood

to smoke a cigar while he indulged these thoughts; he was there still, and thereby missed a spectacle which would certainly have tried his self-restraint.

Just as Hugh came riding round from the stables leading Clara's pony by the bridle-rein, Robert Purton rode up to the gate; he had ridden fast, and he looked very handsome with the bright glow of exercise on his face.

"Stay where you are, Hugh," he said, so eagerly that the boy stared. "I'll mount your cousin if she gives me leave."

He was on his feet as he ended and was leading the pony up to Clara.

"All right. I could have done it." Hugh gave up the pony's rein. He muttered sulkily as he moved on along the path: "Confound his impudence! and that sly Clara pretending she doesn't care; why, she got as red as fire, *I* saw her."

Hugh felt himself unwelcome, unwanted, and it was too bad; why, he had asked Clara to ride with him, and now she was going off with that fool of a Purton.

"I'm not going to wait here all day for them." The spoiled boy cantered on nearly over a young woman who had stopped suddenly just within sight of the gate. "I beg pardon," he called out, and rode on; but the young woman never stirred; her eyes, her whole being seemed suddenly spell-bound, as if by witchcraft, on the little scene which would so have irritated Mr. Montgomery.

Clara looked beautiful, blushing and trembling with her happiness; for it was the first time that Robert had overcome all reserve in addressing her; and as her well-shaped foot touched his hand and he placed her carefully in her saddle, a thrill of warm admiration quickened the

young man's pulses and sent a smile of delight to his eyes. No one looking at those two faces could have supposed them mere indifferent acquaintance.

And the eyes so intently bent on them saw love in theirs. Nancy's passionate jealousy died in a sudden chill, for jealousy must have hope to feed its fire, and Nancy had no hope left now. She had wronged Mr. Purton by even a doubt of his story. He had spoken simply and truly, and not to torment her, when he said that his son was engaged to Miss Montgomery.

"Why did I struggle against that warning feeling? Why did I not turn back to Shallerton?"

Before power of movement had come to her, she thought before Clara could be firmly seated, the two were close upon her. Nancy could not stir; it

seemed to her as if she were acting out some part she had been sent there to fulfil as she met Robert's glance and returned it; but as he reined up his horse the spell broke. Nancy hurried on without a word or look of recognition, pushed through the garden gate, and never stopped till she stood under the verandah of the cottage.

She did not glance back, but a clatter told her that the horses had reached the wooden bridge and that she was safe from pursuit.

She smiled with scorn at herself. As if Robert would care to follow her! He had been willing to speak to her for old acquaintance' sake; Nancy's lips pressed closely together, and her hands clenched painfully tight. This was all she could ever more expect of Robert.

A dull stupor crept over her, a strange

faintness blinded and deafened her to the outward world. She did not see Clara's father pass through the garden and look at her with cold wondering eyes. She stood as if Queen Labe had been at work —white and still.

CHAPTER IX.

GONE.

MRS. LLEWELLYN had questioned and re-questioned the maid who opened the door at Fernside, and then had gone round to the offices to see if she could elicit any further information. It seemed to her that Godfrey must have already left his home when he parted from her, and that she had only lost time and any chance of recovering a trace of him by hurrying to Fernside.

"Bless your heart, ma'am, they're miles away by now," a good-natured gardener told her; one of the few servants who troubled to stay to listen to her inquiries.

She turned away. Anger against Norah, roused by Godfrey's words, had been kept down by eager hope. If she could but see Godfrey she might yet persuade him to give up this rash departure; but now anger flamed up again, and the old lady hurried back to the cottage almost as fast as she had left it.

"I will know the meaning of it at once. Norah must have said something outrageous, or Godfrey would not have acted in this wild way. What right has she to come between me and my boy, when I have given up all these years to her only?"

Perhaps the devotion with which she had shielded her son's widow from all the outward roughnesses of life had never before been so apparent; and the stern old woman set her eyebrows into a fixed frown, and went on to the cottage.

Norah had come back through the grounds—a nearer way than that which Mrs. Llewellyn had taken along the road.

She met her brother at the gate, beyond the gravelled path.

Mr. Montgomery's aspect was puckered and peevish — entirely suggestive of a desire to put his annoyance on the shoulders of some one else.

"What has happened?" Norah asked. Her vague misgivings about Clara and Robert came back at once.

"I have been exceedingly annoyed"—he pressed his thin lips together, and fixed his handsome foolish blue eyes into the stony stare which he considered impressive—"but I cannot tell you now; it would take too long; you had better go into the garden; there is a young woman there leaning against the verandah in the most extraordinary manner."

Norah's heart beat quicker. Instead of obeying her brother she drew back.

This must be Nancy Blane, and how could she face her? How could she confess that her remonstrances had only urged Myra into flight?

Just now Norah had dreaded a meeting with her mother-in-law. Now the sight of Mrs. Llewellyn, hurrying down the path through the wood, was most welcome.

It seemed to Spenser Montgomery that every inhabitant of this small world was in league against his peace, for it never occurred to him that he could be other than the sun of any world in which he might revolve. He disliked hurry and excitement, and first Mrs. Llewellyn, and then Norah, had gone away in most unseemly haste; next had come Hugh's very unpleasant revelations about Clara and her confused evasive answers; then the appari-

tion of a strange young woman, either in a fit or out of her senses; and last, Mrs. Llewellyn, panting and bustling, far more like an excited cookmaid than a gentlewoman.

Spenser Montgomery would have liked to lecture her as he opened the gate for her; but there was a sternness, almost a fierceness in her face, that kept him silent, and, indeed, she gave him no chance of speech.

She pushed past him and paused in front of Norah.

"Norah, do you know what you have done? Do you know you have driven my son away by your pride and folly?"

There was more than anger in her voice; it had the pathetic ring which sorrow brings — the beginning of the broken utterance which so often ends in tears. But as yet Mrs. Llewellyn's eyes

glowed with indignation; there was no sign of weakness in the bright dark gaze she kept on Norah's troubled face.

"Go away, Spenser, please," said poor Norah. She could not forget her sense of propriety even then.

"Really"—Mr. Montgomery's curiosity made it hard for him to obey willingly—"there is something sadly unregulated and unconventional about all this; I think they are all crazy. The sooner I take Clara home the better."

"I followed you to Fernside," said Norah, timidly, "and I heard that Mr. and Mrs. Brendon had gone away."

"And you say it as calmly as if you were talking of an ordinary acquaintance, and you a mother. Why, Norah"—Mrs. Llewellyn was suddenly lifted out of her usual common-sense estimate and treatment of things into impassioned earnest-

ness—"do you really understand what you have done? You have robbed me of my children. Ah, how would you feel if Hugh were taken away? and this is worse, for Godfrey had left me once and had come home again of his own free will, and now I shall never get him back."

Norah thought this talk exaggerated, and her self-possession returned.

"I really cannot see why you should think so," and then she stopped. How was she to tell Mrs. Llewellyn the truth? How could she tell her of her son's guilt? Till now this side of Myra's unhappy story had not taken a clear hold of Norah's mind. Her thoughts went on to Nancy, waiting in hope, doubtless, to hear the result of her own interview with Myra.

"You cannot see" — the old woman looked very stern and hard—"and yet you

are the cause of all. Oh, Norah, what is the use of gentleness and refinement, and courtesy, if it is not shown to all alike? It is all a mock and a counterfeit when it is only shown by whim and caprice. You despise that poor pretty child because she is unsophisticated and simple. How do you know that she is not as precious in God's sight as you are?"

Norah's repentance cooled at this appeal. She not better in God's sight than a girl living in open sin, and by her own free will too! and yet how could she justify herself?

"I should like to know what you mean"—her quiet suave manner irritated Mrs. Llewellyn far more than indignation would have done—"I might have been kinder to Myra, but it is not because of my unkindness that your son has taken her away."

"Then you mean to dispute Godfrey's own words? He told me that, after your behaviour to Myra yesterday, when it seems you saw her alone, he could not possibly remain at Fernside."

Norah roused at last to self-defence. "Mr. Brendon deceived you; at least," the old woman's eyes flashed so threateningly that Norah feared she would not listen, "he told you only some of the truth. He cannot remain at Fernside with Myra, Mrs. Llewellyn; but it is not only because of my discussion with Myra. Shall I tell you the truth about her, the whole truth?"

"No, I will not listen to any slander you may have raked up. I don't want any one to help me judge men and women, and if that girl is not pure and innocent, then there is no such thing as truth to be found. I'll not hear one word."

She had advanced towards the angle of the cottage. As she went on to pass through the open window Nancy Blane came forward.

Mrs. Llewellyn had seen her once before, but only casually on her way to the gardener's cottage; the noble earnest face arrested her attention as much as Nancy's words did.

"May God bless you, ma'am! She has been grievously sinned against, poor dear, but there's no sin in my sister Miriam."

A sudden grey paleness came on the mother's face, just now, in a glow of passion, but Mrs. Llewellyn did not tremble; she stood as firm as one of the hills towering on the other side of the river. Her eyes searched the two faces between which she stood with eager question; the one so sweet and soft, and refined—the other full of highly-set earnest purpose — two

faces that seemed as if they were made to contrast; on the one might have been written Excelsior, on the other "Manners maketh Man;" but on both, just now, Mrs. Llewellyn read one meaning, and that so plainly shown, that she could not choose, but take it home. It was pity—warm, loving pity—for her.

CHAPTER X.

AT BUTTON COURT.

CLARA was puzzled by her companion's silence. She saw Nancy, but she missed the rapid glance exchanged with Robert, and his attempt to stop and speak to the young woman.

"How very awkward of that girl to stand still in the midst of the road! Fairy was inclined to shy."

Robert did not answer. He did not send one look after Nancy. He was struck to the heart by her avoidance, it seemed to him her scornful avoidance of his attempt to greet her.

"What have I done?" he asked himself

with generous longing, to take the blame, so that Nancy might be shielded from it. "Is she hurt that I have not been to see her since Matthew died?" And then a flush rose up in his face.

No, Nancy was not hurt. Nancy cared too little about him to care for his absence or his presence. She wished to avoid him, that was all. He knew this before to-day; he had wrestled with the torture the thought gave him, and had sought refuge from it at Mrs. Llewellyn's cottage; and yet he had not believed it. There had been the hope that, could Miriam be parted from her lover, Nancy would like to be his wife.

But this face-to-face meeting had taught him that which we are all made to feel in our lives; doubts and misgivings may torture, but they are nothing to the keen agony of a living present conviction. No

called-up image of Nancy's face could have stabbed Robert as that cold fixed glance had wounded him. It seemed to him as if her eyes still met his, he could not shut them from his sight.

Clara had spoken twice, but Robert had forgotten her presence. Anger against Nancy was mastering every thought. Clara could not understand his silence; she urged her pony into a canter and came up with Hugh.

"Oh! here you are at last, Clara. Well, I must say when I ask you to ride with me it's an awfully cool thing to go off with that fellow Purton."

Hugh had never ventured on such a tone before, but nothing so exasperates the boy mind as to be set aside for an older specimen of his sex.

"Hugh"—Clara was not angry, but there was such a determined ring in her voice

that the boy's sulky face grew more amiable—"once for all, don't make remarks on my behaviour. I shall treat my friends as I choose, but you are cowardly and uncivil to tease me as you have to-day. I thought you a man, and men don't tease women."

Robert came up as she ended.

His face had cleared; he had made up his mind; he had resolved to see Nancy with her will or without, on his return to the cottage. A few hours now, he thought, must part Miriam from Godfrey Brendon, and, meantime, he felt reckless. He would put these gloomy thoughts from him and give himself up to the amusement that was thrown in his way.

"Those young rabbits are coming on famously," he said to Hugh. "I should think I might bring them over the next time I come?"

"Do you really mean I may have them? Oh! thank you."

Hugh's wrath was completely soothed. He had seen four young rabbits on his last visit to the farm, and had set his heart on them, but he had not understood they were to be his. He rode on beside Robert in a state of ecstasy.

"I say, Clara," he broke out suddenly, "it wouldn't be too far for you, would it? It's only six miles, I know, and if we ride fast we could do it in an hour. Couldn't we, Mr. Purton? Clara will go, won't you? Two of them are lop-eared. I daresay my pockets will hold them."

"Do you mean the rabbits?" Robert laughed, and then he looked at Miss Montgomery. "It would not take us long," he said, "but it might tire your cousin."

"Oh no, I should like it." Clara

blushed; a momentary thought of Norah and her father was disturbing, so she put it aside. Mrs. Llewellyn had taken her to Button Court, and to-day Hugh was with her. The delicious joy that filled her at the thought of being so long with Robert left no room for misgivings. Clara's will had hitherto been the law of her life and the life of those among whom she lived, and now love quelled any strength she might have used against it.

"Yes, yes; all right, she'll go," said Hugh, eagerly: "she'll like it awfully, I know. I'll go on." At which judicious observation the boy put spurs to his pony and left the pair together.

Robert looked at his companion, but her face was turned away.

"I hope you don't really mind such a long ride, but I suppose he will be very glad to get his rabbits?"

"I shall like it very much"—Clara spoke with her usual calmness—"I never tire of riding."

"Do you ride much in London?"

"I have a horse and a groom, but it is quite different there; one is obliged to ride in certain set places. I begin to wonder how I shall ever endure again the bondage of a London life. I do hate it so." She turned her beautiful blue eyes sorrowfully on Robert.

"Why don't you persuade Mr. Montgomery to live in the country?" he said. "I don't think he follows any profession, does he?"

Clara blushed.

"Oh no; but papa is a thorough Londoner: he could not exist without his club and his regular routine of acquaintance; he only cares to be in the country when his friends go there, and I am not

sure he would like it at all in a house of his own; he has no country tastes except for a little partridge-shooting, and I suppose," she said, laughing, "that is quite as much a cockney taste as a country one."

"But you perhaps will marry some country gentleman?"

Robert spoke sympathizingly.

"I am not likely to marry."

They rode on in silence. Robert felt very sorry for his beautiful companion; it seemed to him wonderful that, brought up as she had been by a cold artificial man of the world in the midst of society, she should have kept such simple unconventional tastes.

How different she was to the stately stylish young lady he had thought her on that first visit to Button Court, and yet he remembered, with an interest that grew

keener each time he glanced at the beautiful face beside him, that even then she had seemed interested in all he showed to Mrs. Llewellyn; she had lingered when the old lady had hurried away.

"Could you be happy always in the country?" he said, earnestly, and then he wondered at himself and the eagerness with which he listened for her answer.

She smiled.

"You know the saying, 'One never knows what one can do till one tries;' but I have been so very happy lately that" — she looked up here and met Robert's eager glance—"that—that—oh, what was I saying?—I suppose I mean that happiness depends less on place than on people and on association."

"Of course it does." Robert had grown completely fascinated in watching the changes of expression that flitted over

her charming face; he had lost all consciousness of his own identity in the interest he felt in Clara.

There was another pause; the air was full of brightness; a lark high over their heads seemed spokesman to the happiness they felt in each other.

It was to Robert the newest, almost the most exquisite sensation of his life; there was no excitement about it; it seemed to him as if he had found a real friend, a sister to whom he could speak as he chose. Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn had been delightful, but old remembrances hedged her about with the awe which kills friendship. Perhaps there is no relation which demands such utter freedom from conventional restraint as that rare but real privilege — friendship between man and woman.

Clara tired of the silence first. Robert

liked it; it seemed to fill his wounded longing heart, not with the love he craved, but with an unspeakable rest and refreshment; but Clara was too restless with the unslaked fever of doubting love to bear this suspense for long.

"But you have no association to give charm to your life, you are nearly always alone; it must be so dull and sad to be so much alone?"

"When I went to live at Button Court I did not count on being alone there always." The story of his love came rushing to Robert's lips, but he checked it; he had tried to make a confidant of Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn, and his courage had failed him, but he was not sure of sympathy with Clara. In that moment he almost called her by her name; he was intoxicated with this new-found delight of friendship. He looked at her with eyes

full of honest affection, but his words stayed unformed. Instinct forbade him to speak; it was no definite sensation that closed his lips on the chapter of his love. In that glance Robert knew, and every pulse tingled with the sudden knowledge, that he might expect full sympathy from his beautiful friend on any subject but that of Nancy Blane.

"Ah!" Clara said this more to herself than to Robert.

"I wish"—he urged his horse on faster—"you could always stay at the cottage; I can't tell you what it is to be able to speak out freely to any one who is so kind and feeling, and takes such an interest."

These were the warmest words he had spoken, and yet Clara was disappointed. Just now he had looked full of love.

"He is so modest," she said. "Well,

it is independence and I honour him for it; I cannot be surprised after the way in which papa treated him yesterday."

Hugh came riding back.

"I say, Mr. Purton, I've been up to the farm, and I saw that fellow Joe—he's an awfully cool chap. When I said I was come for the rabbits he actually winked, and then he said, 'Don't you wish it, governor?' If he hadn't been your boy, I should have thrashed him."

Hugh said this with so much magnanimity that Robert and Clara both laughed at him.

They rode up to the farm, and Hugh followed sulkily.

"What right have they to laugh? If I had laughed at them there'd have been some reason in it, spoonying away all by themselves this hour at least; I shall just tell uncle Godfrey and Myra, and see what

they think. Why, there's Robert laughing again—I never saw him so lively—I don't think it's proper of Clara to go on laughing and joking like that with him."

Hugh was right. Robert was so completely moved out of himself that he felt younger and brighter than he had felt since he had first told his love to Nancy. He had not given up his purpose of seeing her on his return to the cottage, but he dreaded that it would be a hopeless meeting. He tried to lose sight of it by throwing himself, heart and soul, into the new interest which had come into his life, and which his reserved nature would have admitted only by slow degrees, but for this effort against thought.

But as he led Clara round the farm-buildings, and saw the warm interest she took in every cow, and pig, and chick, to which he drew her attention, his liking for

her increased. What a different life his might be with such a friend always beside him, to enter into all his plans and hopes, and soothe his worries and disappointments. She could not be Nancy; but then no one could ever fill her place; that was past and gone. No one could ever be the love he had so long cherished, but still Clara would make life very pleasant.

And Robert's manner grew gentler, softer, as he opened and shut the gates and doors, and bade Clara tenderly now beware of the vicious short-horn, and now of a rusty nail at the corner of the byre. The afternoon wore away deliciously for both of them. The sun shot level light through the trees that made the duck-pond gloomy, flickering on orange feet, that drifted behind their green-headed owners, and on one or two white ducks which had ended a gabbling dispute by a hasty souse into the water.

Joe stood half hidden by a haystack; his black eyes seemed closed, but they were watching intently.

"That's a likely gal, that is, she's a reg'lar stunner, and yet I'm blessed if I knows what Robert's up to with her. The gal as them letters was wrote to was Miss Nancy Blane. Now this here's Miss Montgomery, I learned about her the last time I went down to Sparmouth. Seems to me Robert's playin' double. My eyes! what a lark it 'ud be if I told her about Miss Blane, or suppose I told t'other one about her? I'm not going to have this one here neither—she'll want a deal too much waitin' on."

CHAPTER XI.

NANCY.

MRS. LLEWELLYN recovered herself before either of the younger women spoke. "Come indoors." She said it as a word of command, without waiting to see if she were obeyed. She walked on with her long manlike steps into the little drawing-room.

"You had better sit down, Nancy," Mrs. Hugh said. "I have sad news for you."

But Nancy still stood. She put her hand on the back of a chair.

"Thank you, ma'am—will you please tell me all at once? Don't keep anything

from me, please." She had turned her back on Mrs. Llewellyn.

"I don't understand"—Mrs. Llewellyn came up to Norah — "why this young woman is here"—then she fixed her eyes on Nancy with keen inquiry, and light as to her presence there began to dawn— "are you related to my son's wife, young woman?"

"I'm her sister, ma'am"—a new thought came to Nancy at the sight of the troubled venerable face—"but I don't know if all is as it should be. Will you ask your son, ma'am, if Miriam is his true and lawful wife, or if he's only deceived her, and brought her to shame?"

"You're out of your senses, girl." Mrs. Llewellyn spoke sternly. "Norah, where on earth have you picked up such a mad woman? My son's wife may be your sister or not, that matters little; but

it matters a great deal that you should venture to come here and slander Mr. Brendon to his own mother."

"Hush"—Norah put her hand on Mrs. Llewellyn's arm—she was frightened at this prolonged vehemence. "Mother"—she spoke so softly and sweetly that Nancy's aching heart was soothed even by the words addressed to another—"I am afraid what she says is the truth. Your son has no right to be the husband of poor Myra. This is what I wanted to tell you just now."

The old woman's face kept the set, firm look it had had when she advanced to Norah, but the sudden paleness in it roused Nancy Blane.

"Sit down, ma'am. If you don't keep quiet you'll suffer for it."

There was innate reverence in Mrs. Llewellyn for stature and commanding presence, and she obeyed the firm clasp

of Nancy's hand as she would not have obeyed Norah.

"You must please listen to Mrs. Hugh," Nancy said, as if she were speaking to a child. In that moment she was the strongest of the three, and she knew it; and it was the power which suffering gives, the power of self-denial and self-control, which made Nancy stronger than her companions.

She only knew by insight what had gone before between these two; but sympathy for the sorrow in the one face, and the trouble in the other, helped her nearer the truth than they could have guessed.

Norah hesitated a moment. It seemed as if she ought to tell the whole story to her mother-in-law, but the pleading in Nancy's eyes would be listened to.

"I saw your sister yesterday. I told her I had a message from you. But,

Nancy, I wish I had waited—it was just as I expected—your sister would scarcely listen, and at last she said she would remain with Mr. Brendon whether she were his wife or not."

Nancy's lips parted, but she did not speak.

"If *you* had told her perhaps she would have listened"—Norah's voice grew choked—"but—but she does not like me, and, perhaps, I was not a fit person to speak to her."

Norah hid her eyes in her handkerchief.

"You told me to listen," Mrs. Llewellyn broke in, "but it seems to me you only make bad worse. By what right have you"—she looked from one to the other—"been keeping a secret like this from me? Whether it be true or false, I, as Mr. Brendon's mother, ought to have known it first. Oh, Norah."

But Nancy placed herself in front of Mrs. Llewellyn.

"There is no one to blame," she said, simply. "My father heard that your son had made a false marriage with our Miriam—and it broke his heart. Before he died—he died not long ago,"—the sad voice softened—"he sent me to Buenos Ayres to fetch Miriam home. I got there too late, she had started for England. I went home and told father, and meantime we learned that your son had come to live at Fernside, so I came here to see Miriam."

"Yes; I saw you one day near the gardener's cottage."

"I lodged there a few days," Nancy went on. "I wanted to tell this sad story to my sister. I had been to Fernside, and Mr. Brendon forbade me his house."

"Are you sure he did?" Mrs. Llewellyn had grown too much interested to be angry.

"Yes, I am sure; I went to the house once and saw him, and I think he guessed who I was. I was not much surprised he should refuse me; of course he's a gentleman, and Miriam has been brought up to be different to me, and it's but natural he should try to keep us apart, but he has done Miriam a great wrong, and I can't forgive him for not letting her go to see father, or write to him even. He didn't know what Miriam was to father, maybe."

Nancy paused to subdue her own rising tears, but no one broke in on her story; they only listened till the earnest voice should speak again.

"I felt somehow bewildered when I found I couldn't get to see her, for I had promised father to take her home, ma'am, and I knew, oh! how well I knew how he'd be looking and longing for Miriam.

She was his darling. She was always sweet and pretty; from the time she was a baby she never gave father a cross or a hasty word. I knew you lived here, ma'am" — she looked at Mrs. Llewellyn as if to excuse herself for keeping her in ignorance—"but I couldn't go to you. I thought if she loves Mr. Brendon as father loves Miriam, she'll either not believe me, or it 'll break her heart."

Mrs. Llewellyn shook her head, her face was sadly wrung with pain.

"I daresay you meant well, but it was a sad mistake; you had only to think and you must have seen that it would come to my knowledge sooner or later."

"No, ma'am, you need never have known the worst. I meant to take Miriam away quietly and surely. You would have blamed her, no doubt, poor lass, for going away, but then you'd never have known

who she was, or aught about her, for I knew Mr. Brendon would keep that to himself; you need never have known his wickedness. Besides, I'd promised father to keep Miriam's secret, so I had no choice. I tried to get Mrs. Hugh"—she looked at Norah—"to take me to see my sister, and she took me to the house when she found I was bound not to answer questions, but we met Mr. Brendon again, and that time I was sure the story was true, when I saw how fierce and desperate he was."

Mrs. Llewellyn looked wonderingly at Norah.

"Yes," she answered, "I think, too, that Godfrey must have guessed who Nancy was, he behaved with such strange violence."

"Well, go on"—Mrs. Llewellyn's voice was harsh, as if she were strained to endure

to the end—"then you got Norah to tell your sister?"

"I asked Mrs. Hugh to do it, but I did not think she would."

"Why did you not persevere?" said Mrs. Llewellyn, with sudden fire. "You were a coward, after all. Why, if you had clung to your sister, gone down on your knees to her, she'd have listened—she must have listened—it was not likely she would even believe Norah."

"I couldn't, ma'am—God so ordered it. I got news my father was ill, and by time I reached home he lay dying."

The old woman's stern glance had been fixed on Nancy's face; now it travelled over her mourning garb, and then with a sigh that had a smothered groan in it, she hid her face in her hands.

Matthew Blane was dead. Yes, she remembered how Mr. Purton had told her

he lay dangerously ill, and her son Godfrey had broken his heart. She was not realizing then her son's actual sin against his own wife and Miriam. She only thought of the cruelty of taking the man's child so utterly from him, just because she was helpless and unprotected, to gratify Godfrey's selfishness. The very curse of pride against which her son had rebelled in Norah had been shown in himself in far darker shades.

She sat there wrapt in the bitter agony which only mothers can drink to the dregs; the agony which rends the heart as bereavement never can rend. All the foolish fond excuses, all the weak yieldings to the child's, and then the boy's, impetuous self-will—all the fostering she had given to her son's pride and self-will, smote on Mrs. Llewellyn like hail; her head bent lower and lower, but no sound, no sigh

even passed her lips. She sat as Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, may have sat, watching her dead, for Mrs. Llewellyn felt that her son was dead—the son that she had idolized, worshipped as a hero, a man to be honoured by all—was dead and gone from her for ever.

Nancy stood looking at her with earnest tenderness.

"Come away a little," she said gently to Norah; "she's best alone; think how much harder it is for her than for any. Ah! ma'am, only think how you'd feel if your boy went wrong."

Norah turned pale. It seemed to her that she had much to go through with Hugh before she could feel happy and trustful. How should she ever persuade him to give up his uncle Godfrey?

She followed Nancy into the verandah.

"I have not thanked you for seeing my

sister, but will you please tell me how it came about? When I went away you said you would not."

"I did not wish to go, and I see I was right, I did no good; your sister was angry at my interference, and then she said what I told you just now; but I think"—poor Norah wished to be candid, and yet her fastidiousness held her in check—"that I was not the person who ought to have told her. I was too formal, too unloving, Nancy"—she warmed up suddenly—"I have not got the heart you have."

"Miriam is not your sister," said Nancy simply, but the words seemed rather to escape than to be spoken. She had put herself forward at once to shield Mrs. Hugh from her mother-in-law's anger, and she had not fully realized all that Miriam had done; but now, standing

there apart, for she turned her face away towards the river, the truth came to her in all its blackness. Miriam, of her own free will, had gone away with a man who had a living wife. In that moment all excuses were torn away, and she saw and felt the shame that had fallen on her father's name —and to Nancy shame was worse than death—it was the withering up of life and hope. It seemed to her as if a sudden leprosy had smitten her; she was for ever severed from the pure and the honoured. Large tears rolled down her cheeks; but Nancy's thoughts soon left herself—soon travelled after her poor wronged sister.

"May God forgive her," she murmured, "and He will. I'll not believe but that quick repentance will come to my darling; she was sorely tried; and Mrs. Hugh may have angered her, and then the poor soul finding herself alone, clung to the

only friend she had, and he was the tempter. Yes, if ever the devil came in man's shape to lead a girl to her ruin, it was Godfrey Brendon."

Nancy's dark eyes lighted and the blood came back to her cheeks with her honest wrath.

Norah had had time for recollection. She came up now and touched the girl's full shapely arm, hanging down so listlessly.

"You know I said I would not speak to your sister."

Nancy looked disturbed, but she only bowed her head at the unwelcome interruption.

"Till yesterday I had meant to wait for you; but then your sister met some one here whom she knew; and, and,"—the calm yet searching look that met her abashed Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn,—"he said

there was no time to be lost, so I went at once."

"Then Robert Purton was here yesterday?" Nancy spoke as coolly as if he were a mere acquaintance.

"Yes, and he is coming here to-day. You would like to see him, would you not?"

Norah smiled with the interest she felt.

It seemed to her that she had been guilty towards Nancy. She longed to give her comfort and consolation.

"No, thank you, I have seen him. I saw him just now, riding out with a lady —your niece I believe. I only came for Miriam. I will not give you any more trouble. I will go back to Shallerton."

"You must not, indeed. You must stay here at least a few days to rest. I am sure my mother will wish it." Norah looked back into the room.

"What is that I should wish, my dear?"

There was a subdued tone in Mrs. Llewellyn's voice that touched her companions. It was full of weary heart-ache; and yet, through this there pierced a gentleness towards her daughter-in-law.

"Mother, you would like Nancy to stay and rest. She says she must go back at once to Shallerton."

Mrs. Llewellyn came forward to the window. She looked at the tall, well-formed figure, so full of dignified sadness, and her sympathy increased.

"Come here, Nancy Blane," she said, and Nancy turned towards her.

"It seems to me that we have all been over-hasty; we have all taken for granted this story of a first wife, of whom, remember, I have never heard. Even your father, Nancy, seems to have had this story on hearsay evidence."

"He learned it from Mr. Purton, and Mr. Purton made the sailor, who learned it at Buenos Ayres, tell it all out again to father."

"Mr. Purton told your father! why, he was here talking to me, and he said nothing about it. How could the man be so crafty? Do you mean to say that he knew for certain that Myra was your sister?"

"He and his son were the only two that knew, besides ourselves. But my father bade Mr. Purton keep the secret."

"But even then we are resting on this sailor's story. It won't do, Nancy; there's not enough foundation for it. I'll not believe till my son tells me it is true. You must come with me—we shall find them together—and I promise you that if it is as you think we will bring Miriam back."

Hope had come back to Mrs. Llewellyn with her own words. She looked full of life and animation; and even Nancy felt hopeful, and as if between them they must rescue Miriam.

"Nancy"—Norah spoke softly—"you surely will help your sister, and besides you have another motive." Nancy's eyebrows rose with surprise—the surprise that always came when she felt herself singled out for special interest. "I believe another person's happiness depends on this separation."

A quick flush of wounded pride came in the girl's face.

"You have been misinformed, ma'am; I am by myself in the world now; Miriam's shame can only touch me."

But Nancy's resentment showed Norah that she was not mistaken; her quick perception helped her to guess thus far,

although it failed in showing her the motive of Nancy's emotion.

"Ah but, Nancy, we are friends now. We must be friends, you may trust me and my mother." It was impossible to Norah to believe that the delicacies of reserve could exist among inferiors; she went on: "I was told you had given up a man you loved because you would not marry while your sister remained with Mr. Brendon."

Nancy grew crimson. Her spirit rose in proud revolt. No one had a right to interfere with her love—that at least was her own business.

"Robert must have told her," she thought. "But if he really loved me he could not talk of me to Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn."

"Mr. Robert Purton," Norah went on, "sent a message to your sister; he said she could look on Button Court as a home if

she liked to come there—and—and—" Norah wished to say how glad she was that her friend Robert had made so suitable a choice, but Nancy's cold displeased look checked her. While Nancy listened to Mrs. Hugh the scene at the little gate was acting itself over again in her brain—"but he is coming here—you will see him presently, and then you can arrange your own plans." Norah smiled up at the impassive face, but there was no answering sign of sympathy.

"Nancy," said the old lady, "you are surely willing to go with me? Don't talk to her about Robert Purton now, Norah. She will have time to see him before we start. But are you quite sure there is no mistake, my dear?"

There was a significant tone in the words only meant for her daughter-in-law, but Nancy comprehended it at once.

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Hugh is quite mistaken. There is nothing between Robert Purton and me—there never can be. I would not marry him with this stain on my name, and I am sure he would not have me now if I would." Then she went on quickly, for Norah looked eager to speak: "It may be when he and Miss Montgomery come back from riding—he may ask for me, but perhaps you'll tell him this, ma'am." She turned to Mrs. Llewellyn as if she distrusted Norah. "I don't want to see him ever again, neither here or at Shallerton." She paused and kept her eyes fixed on the ground a few minutes before she spoke again.

"I thank you, ma'am, for asking me to go with you to seek for Miriam—but I don't see my way clear to do it. When I went to Brazil, and when I came here, I was following a plain duty; my father had

laid it on me, and Miriam did not know what she was doing. She thought she was Mr. Brendon's wife. But, ma'am, to me it's quite changed now; Miriam does know that she is living in sin. She was brought up to know how holy and awful a thing marriage is in God's sight. She has had more teaching than I have — she's older too. Don't you think, ma'am, that she will listen to God when he speaks to her in her own conscience, much more likely than she will listen to me? Oh, ma'am, if you'll help me pray for her you'll do a deal more good than by dragging her away by force from your son."

But Mrs. Llewellyn could not give up so easily. She insisted, and then entreated. She even reproached Nancy with want of proper feeling.

Norah, too, put in her word.

"I did not contradict you just now,

but you are quite mistaken, Nancy, in what I see you fancy about my niece and Mr. Purton. Such an attachment"—she tried to speak calmly, but her eyes kindled—"would be quite impossible in every way; so pray don't let any idea of that kind make any unhappiness between you and Robert Purton."

Norah did not know how much annoyance had crept into her voice, but Nancy had understood her thoroughly.

"I am very sorry for you, Mrs. Hugh, if it'll grieve you," she said, "but it is better for you to understand that you have been altogether mistaken. I was just as much decided to keep single a month ago as I am now. I thought then it might be till Miriam was safe home again, but now I see no way out of it. It's disgrace not sorrow that's come to us."

She turned to say good-by to Mrs. Llewellyn.

"You're angry with me now, ma'am, for not seeing things as you do, but you'll see I am right after a bit. If it had been God's will Miriam would have left your son when she knew he'd deceived her. It's not like a small fault—it's not like a thing there can be two judgments of. It's sin, and Miriam knows it's sin, and she's chosen it. She'll turn to God if we pray for her, but He must call her His own way—we've tried ours."

She walked away without a moment of hesitation or doubt, with a firm unfaltering tread. The two widows gazed after her with loving admiration; and yet, while they were commenting on her noble endurance, Nancy was struggling hard to maintain composure. She longed to run at her utmost speed, so that she might escape the chance of another meeting with Robert Purton.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. MONTGOMERY MAKES UP HIS MIND.

On the morning after Nancy's visit the cottage breakfast-table was unusually silent. Mrs. Llewellyn's face still bore the sad shocked look that Nancy's story had brought on it; Norah was anxious and pre-occupied. Hugh knew nothing of his uncle's disappearance, and she had to give him some sort of an explanation, and she must also give Nancy's message to Robert Purton and tell him the result of her interview with Myra.

Robert had asked for Mrs. Hugh when he returned from his ride, but Norah

had pretexted a headache, and he had left word that he would ride over again to-morrow as he specially wanted to see Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn.

Mr. Montgomery was silent and captious. Clara even seemed to have caught the general dulness, and was as uncommunicative as the rest.

Mr. Montgomery considered that he had just cause for displeasure. He had tried to think calmly over this idea of a marriage with Robert Purton, and he found it utterly distasteful and impossible; and, strong in this conviction, he had, as we have seen, hurried away yesterday from Norah and Mrs. Llewellyn, and had gone for a walk.

When he returned some time later, he saw riding down towards the bridge—riding slowly—with their heads bent towards one another in confidential talk, his

daughter Clara and this very objectionable suitor. Hugh was not even in sight.

Mr. Montgomery's anger rose beyond his control. Instead of entering the garden he had turned sharply to the right, and had hidden himself in the wood.

"Hugh, I want you in the study." Norah's voice was very nervous and ill-assured this morning, and Hugh noticed it, and decided that a lecture was impending.

"I'm very sorry, but, mother, won't it do this afternoon? You see I've got to feed my rabbits; I got them yesterday—aren't they jolly little beasts, Clara?—I am so obliged to Purton for them, and, besides, I must run round and tell uncle I've got them before I go to Dawson's."

Mrs. Llewellyn looked as if she were going to speak, then her head bowed down, and the sorrow in her face deepened.

"No, I must speak now, Hugh," Norah said, and she went on to the study.

Hugh was in a rebellious mood; he grew very red, and stood with his hands in his pockets, debating whether he should obey.

"Hugh," the look in his grandmother's face startled his perception awake, "go to your mother and do all she bids you."

Even Clara looked up. There was such a yearning under-tone, almost it may be called an agony of entreaty, in Mrs. Llewellyn's voice. It seemed to her in that moment that she saw Godfrey over again in the handsome rebellious lad, and she snatched eagerly at the hope of undoing some of the wrong that had been perhaps done to Norah's boy. For with Mrs. Llewellyn, truth once heard was not repulsed; all through the night she had been following out the thoughts Nancy

had awakened, and every hour her self-condemnation had deepened — deepened till the anguish had become almost more than she could bear. Her hope of separating Godfrey from Myra had soon died away, and the anguish had deepened. But the brave old woman had not turned away from it; she had accepted every fresh pang, as some, the only atonement she could offer for her wilful blindness to her son's faults; but till this morning the result of his influence on Hugh, and the part she had taken in abetting the boy's self-will, had escaped unnoticed— as faults blacker than Mrs. Llewellyn's will lie unnoticed, maybe till the senses are powerless to notice anything.

Hugh went out sullenly; he did not see why his grandmother should speak in that tragical way before uncle Spenser.

"Just as if I was a child."

He found his mother waiting in the study, but he did not look at her, he kept both hands in his pockets and whistled.

"Hugh"—Norah tried not to let her trouble come into her voice—"you will be sorry to hear what I have to tell you. Your uncle Godfrey went away yesterday and he is not likely to come back."

"Uncle gone—gone away!" the boy reddened and then grew pale with anger. "And you let him go without telling me? You did it on purpose, and it's an awful shame, mother; but I don't care. I'm not going to be kept from Godfrey and Myra. He told me one day that if I chose to make my home with him I might do it, and I'll go to him, that I will." He had hard work to keep back his tears, but he would not let them come.

"Hugh! oh, Hugh!" and then poor Norah's sobs silenced her; her boy had

been tiresome and sulky, and selfish, but he had never before spoken so undutifully.

A great lump came in his throat at the sight of her tears, but he was too angry to yield.

"I shall go to Dawson's," he said, and he went.

Norah cried bitterly. How happy they had all been till Godfrey came to trouble their peace, and now, who could say how all this would end? How could she, who so shrank from strife and roughness, subdue this strong young will; it seemed to her that she must yield to Hugh rather than lose his love.

Undutifulness was rife that morning.

"Clara"—Mr. Montgomery was sitting alone with his daughter—"your mother wants us at home. I think we might as well return this afternoon. I think, too, we are in the way here. Mrs. Llewellyn

seems ill and out of spirits, and I think she will be better without us."

"I can't help that, I am not ready to go home yet; besides, papa, do you really think I can pack at such short notice? you must wait a couple of days at least."

"That is absurd. When we were abroad, last year, you were always ready to move at an hour's notice. I have made my preparations, and I must request you to make yours."

"I cannot, papa. I really cannot go to-day." She spoke earnestly with a kind of deprecation.

Mr. Montgomery had kept his eyes on his newspaper; he looked up at this. Clara was confused and blushing in a most unusual fashion.

"What is your real reason for refusing?" he said sharply—sudden light had come to him.

She laughed and tried to speak in her careless manner, but it was plainly an effort.

"I have several reasons, but I think the packing reason all sufficient."

Mr. Montgomery writhed with impatience, but he could not bring himself to tax Clara with anything so undignified as an attachment to young Purton.

"If you have no other excuse I must beg you to be ready to start by the three-o'clock train."

"Papa, I cannot."

The father and daughter sat looking into each other's blue eyes, and each read the other's obstinacy; but Clara was too desperate to waste longer time in persuasion.

"I have something special to say to Mr. Purton, and I must see him before I go."

She blushed violently, Mr. Montgomery sneered.

"Really, my dear, you have certainly most extraordinary taste. I must make one request, Clara: I can't have this person asked to my house. I believe I am very wrong to give way at all, but it is too silly to take any notice of; however, to-morrow, I go to London; if you refuse to accompany me you do so at your own risk."

"What's that, I wonder," Clara laughed, as soon as her father had left her: "my railway fare paid out of my allowance, perhaps, for he can't suppose I am afraid of travelling alone. I wonder if I ever could feel afraid of any one?" She sighed. "If I did not feel sure he must love me I should be afraid of *him*."

She knew Robert Purton was coming that afternoon. She had heard him leave the message for Mrs. Hugh. "But I know he is not coming to see Norah: he is coming to see me;" and her heart went on singing

the burden through the rest of the morning, "He is coming to see me."

She stayed indoors; she resisted all Hugh's entreaties to come and see the rabbits. Mrs. Llewellyn asked her to take a walk, and Norah tried to get rid of her presence on more than one pretext; but Clara had taken up a book, and she affected to be so absorbed in it that she paid no heed to any one. Mr. Montgomery went out after luncheon; it seemed to him best to absent himself till this obnoxious visitor should have departed.

He had not heard of Clara's visit to Button Court. He had no idea that matters were as far advanced as his daughter considered they were; it seemed to him that this good-looking young farmer had been presumptuous enough to fall in love, but he should take Clara

away to-morrow and the farmer would cure of his hopeless passion.

He knew Clara was ridiculously vain, but perhaps if he thwarted her she might do something very silly indeed—opposition always made a girl silly. Mr. Montgomery seldom went into definition, and he comforted himself by reflecting that all women must be silly some time or other, and that, on the whole, Clara had been singularly free from the usual folly of her sex.

The afternoon wore on. Clara's head grew hot and her hands cold. If Robert did not come, and her father persisted in his determination to leave the cottage, what must she do? She might return to London and appoint some meeting place with her lover; but a quick flush deepened on her cheeks: she felt by instinct that Robert would not do anything clandestine; moreover, that if he

suspected Mr. Montgomery's opposition he would be too proud to urge his love.

"No; I must stay on here even if I have to quarrel with papa; I shall soon get him round again."

At last the door opened. Clara's heart beat quick with expectation.

"If you please, ma'am," the maid said to Norah, "it's Mr. Robert Purton, but he wants to see you quite alone if you please."

"Show him into the study."

So much had happened to occupy Norah's thoughts that she had quite forgotten her great desire to keep Clara and Robert Purton apart; she never even looked towards her niece as she went out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CONFIDENCE.

ROBERT PURTON shook hands with Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn, and then he kept her hand in his with a wistful look which puzzled her.

"Have you heard what has happened?" she said.

"Do you mean that Nancy Blane has been here? yes, I saw her."

"I meant about Myra—about her sister. I went to see her, but it was of no use; she and Mr. Brendon have left Fernside."

"Oh," and then Robert paused to think. "Did Nancy say anything—I mean, did she leave any message?" Somehow he

felt like a boy with Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn to-day : he was too much excited to shrink from trusting her with his secret.

Norah looked at the bright honest face, and she shrank from the pain she had to give.

"She did leave a message, but I don't think you will care to hear it : she said, 'Tell him I never wish to see him again, here or at Shallerton."

"Nancy said that?" He spoke proudly, and Norah saw the pain in his face.

"I think," she said, gently, "you are too proud a pair to understand one another —for I suppose you are something to each other. It seems to me that Nancy is wrong in taking her sister's blame to herself as she does; but, Robert, why don't you go and see her and persuade her out of this notion? Surely she would listen to you."

Robert turned away uneasily.

"You don't know Nancy. It's a good deal of it my father's fault; he has said things to her which she can't get over. But it's not that only, Mrs. Hugh. Time may change her, but she meant what she said when she gave you that message, and I'm not going to fly in the face of it. If I could tell you all, you would say I was in the right. So long as Miriam stays with Mr. Brendon there's no use in my troubling Nancy—maybe not even then," he said, sadly. "God knows."

Norah's thoughts went back to Clara, and she trembled.

"But, Robert," she said, earnestly, "you do love Nancy, don't you?"

He flushed under her earnest glance.

"We'll not talk about it, if you please. Now I must go and see the rabbits."

"Dear me," said Norah to herself; "I

feel just as puzzled as ever. I'm afraid he does not care at all for Nancy Blane. She was my only safeguard against Clara's infatuation."

At this thought she rose. It would be well to follow Robert and see that no meeting took place between him and Clara. But she was too late; when she reached the drawing-room she saw Robert and Clara already standing by the criss-cross fence.

"I'll walk across the bridge with you," Clara was saying. "I am going away to-morrow, and I have so much I want to say."

"Going away? I am very sorry;" and he looked very sorry as he met the blue eyes raised to his; they were so bewitching in their sweetness. He felt half shy—half charmed.

"Are you—are you sure you are sorry?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" he said, bluntly.

"Are not people usually sorry to lose friends? When I first saw you I had been unhappy, and you have helped to cheer me. Now it will be worse than ever without your kindness."

"I will stay if you wish it." Clara said the words without her own will. Just then she would have given life itself to Robert.

Something in the tone thrilled through him. He looked at Clara, and his eyes sank beneath the love in hers. There was no mistaking her look. Clara was never timid, and passion had broken down the inherent timidity of love.

For an instant he was moved out of himself. There was a wild tumult within. Why should he not take this kind, loving girl to his heart? Nancy refused to make him happy. She had given him up. Why should he not console himself with Clara? But the temptation did not last.

Robert knew, even before its whisper had ended, that he had no love to give Clara in exchange for hers.

"I could not be so selfish. While you are here you are deprived of all that makes your London life happy. You may like country pursuits for a time, but you would tire of them."

"Never," she said, faintly.

"Ah, but I think you would. I can never thank you enough for the kindness you have shown me"—Robert did not look at her: he was trying hard and manfully to forget that exquisite glance, and to treat Clara as a friend, but it was a struggle —"But you are so good, you will understand me"—here he paused. "I meant to have asked you for still greater kindness and sympathy"—his voice hesitated as he went on—"but it is selfish to intrude all my trouble on you."

"What is it?" She still spoke faintly.

Robert looked at her. Her beautiful eyes were still fixed on his face, but the loving look had left them, and he reproached himself for his vanity. He even felt guilty towards Clara—he had actually misinterpreted the warmth of her unselfish friendship—he was mortified at his own vanity.

"She has spoiled me by her sweet goodness," he thought. "I am a contemptible coxcomb."

"What is your unhappiness? Tell me. Perhaps I can help you." She had watched his varying colour, and the hope that had almost died in her heart sprang again into ardent life. But she did not look at Robert. Her eyes drooped; a soft glad hue stole into her cheeks as he took both her hands in his.

They had just reached the bridge.

"Come down here," he said; "but take care, the path is very uneven."

A rough way had been shaped out in the rocky bank—slippery now, and dangerous with moss damped by the foaming spray from the river—but with her hand clasped firmly in Robert's, Clara would have followed him across Niagara.

As they stood thus below the bridge the trunk of a huge ash that grew thirstily near the water, screened them from all eyes. The rush of the sparkling river soothed Robert, but it had no power to calm Clara's agitation.

"Yesterday," he said, "when we were both riding, we met a girl close by the cottage."

Have you ever taken a hot-house plant suddenly from its shelter, and placed it in the open air; and then have you watched the sudden withering, the almost immediate transformation that ensues?

Robert was not watching Clara. He was eager before they parted to reward her unselfish friendship by the fullest proof of confidence he could give—but it was not easy to him to tell the story of his love in this sudden way. If he had seen the girl's livid paleness, the sudden parting of her lips as if she needed more air than could be found around her, the white hands clenched in strong effort against the agony she resolved to hide, he would perhaps have been less abrupt—he might even have kept silence.

"She"—he went on nervously—"promised to be my wife, but disgrace came to her family, and she refused to marry until this was removed. It is possible it may always continue—it is also possible she may leave off loving me—but I cannot change towards her. Now you know why I was unhappy, and why your friendship has been so precious."

For a moment Clara's haughty spirit flashed out. All this time he had been consoling himself with her as a sort of makeshift, but she had no strength to persist in anger. She loved Robert so dearly that she could not give up his friendship. He need never know her love, even if the concealment stifled her.

"I am very sorry"—her voice trembled, and she did not raise her eyes—"you must have been sadly unhappy"—she paused here—she could not find any words—"now we must say a long good-by to one another" — she managed to smile — "I think my father wants me."

She stole one little look as they shook hands, and she saw how disappointed he was—but she dared not try to show a warmer sympathy; an unguarded word even might break down all her defences and betray her utterly.

Robert helped her up the bank: he stood looking after her as she walked away.

"Women are all alike," he said. "A woman is all one can wish as long as one talks of oneself or of her; but directly another woman comes into the talk she grows tired and indifferent. It is my own fault for talking about my trouble, instead of going on to Shallerton, and having it all out with Nancy."

CHAPTER XIV.

MYRA ALONE.

MYRA sat with her face hidden by her hands, her hat lay on the floor beside her, and the room was strewed with articles that told it was only a temporary abode.

Suddenly the girl raised her head and looked round her, then she hurried to the window.

Her eyes fastened on Godfrey's figure, on the opposite side of the little square in which the inn stood. He walked on fast, looking straight before him, without one glance up towards the window.

"I have finished myself now," she said, but she stifled the sobs that came with her

words. "It was hard and cruel of Godfrey to call me a fool, but what else am I? if I mean to fret over myself, I had better have taken Mrs. Hugh's advice and gone to Nancy; if I choose to stay with Godfrey I ought to be cheerful and happy; but I can't—I can't." Her hands covered her face, and once more she sank down sobbing convulsively.

"If that hateful Norah had only held her tongue, we were so very—very happy—and now, just when I feel brightest, I see father and Nancy shaking their heads at me, and making me feel wrong." She stamped her foot. "I won't think of them. Godfrey may have been wrong to deceive me, but then he loved me so he couldn't help it, and, besides, we were married." She sat upright and pushed the hair out of her eyes. "It's too late. He said just now he was tired of my crying

and waywardness; and then, just as he was going out he said very few, placed as he was, would be so patient. Ah! I know what he meant; he is tired of me, and he'll leave me, and then what will become of me?"

She broke down at this and cried till she was fairly exhausted, and then she sat counting the time by quarters of an hour, as the chimes played them softly in the belfry hard by.

Books lay about the room, but Myra never had cared for reading before she met with Godfrey Brendon; the occupation of her life had been herself, and it is wonderful how entirely time becomes absorbed in such a worship. To manufacture and remodel gowns and bonnets, so as best to suit her beauty, had been a very engrossing pursuit, for, from infancy, the girl had learned to think her charms

unrivalled; and now that she had no occasion for this employment Myra's days slipped idly away: she had no other resource; the power of reading would not come at will, and when she was not with Godfrey time became a burden to her.

It would seem as if the very fact of such weariness might teach the reality of future existence, of a higher actual life than that of the mere brute, for our dumb companions do not seem to suffer from ennui; they will sleep out half a day contentedly without any of the craving for variety—in other words without the quickening of divine life which torments their human playfellows.

Godfrey Brendon had gone from Fernside direct to London, and with only the delay necessary to arrange business matters, had gone on to Paris. He wanted distraction and amusement both for him-

self and for Myra, but to his surprise she had shrunk from the bustle of the gay city. In those first moments of remorse he had been willing to yield to her slightest wish, and they had gone on to Belgium as hurriedly as they had quitted England.

At his London agent's Godfrey had found a communication from his Brazilian wife. She told him that she knew what he had done, and that as long as he kept away from Buenos Ayres he might remain in peace, so far as she was concerned; but she upbraided him bitterly with his conduct towards the girl who supposed herself to be his wife.

Her letter had added stings to his self-reproach, and yet he tried to stifle it by telling himself no one was to blame but Norah.

He and his wife had parted from mutual violence of temper before he settled at

Buenos Ayres, but he had not thought at the time that the parting was for life, and, till he met with Miriam Blane, he had considered it possible that the quarrel might be made up. But the passion which the young lovely English girl created was of a more lasting nature than that he had ever felt for this dark-eyed vehement Brazilian; it was the exquisite charm of spring after the glowing exuberance of autumn, and he yielded to the temptation; he resolved to marry Miriam as quickly as possible, and take her to England. Like most men, accustomed only to submit to their own will, Godfrey Brendon would not see that there could be any risk of discovery; he thought that by forbidding Miriam to write to her family he had effectually prevented any identification of her in England as Matthew Blane's daughter, and for a time, separated from all that reminded him of his

former wild life, he had been happy—he had become gentler, kinder—his conscience had slept.

But now to the self-reproach which in itself almost maddened him as he realized the truth of Miriam's position among other women, she herself added aggravation. She tried to be cheerful and bright as usual, but if he came in the room unexpectedly he always found her either weeping, or with traces of sorrow on her face.

To-day he had reproached her harshly, and she had cried afresh; at this Godfrey had lost all self-command; he did not mean all he said, but he had told the terrified sobbing girl that unless she could make life pleasanter to him they would be best apart, and then he had hurried away without a kiss or a word of forgiveness.

Mechanically, as he passed the post-

office, he asked for letters. Till to-day he had shrank from doing this, and it was a shock now when a letter was given to him addressed in his mother's firm writing.

"I've had woman's jaw enough for one day," he said roughly, and he thrust the letter in his pocket. He felt reckless—he longed to get away from every one—away from himself and his own sombre thoughts. As he hurried along he saw at the entrance of a court-yard, "Salle d'équitation—des chevaux à louer."

He went in and asked to look at the horses that were to be had on hire.

They were a sorry set to such a practised judge as Godfrey Brendon.

The groom who showed them was an Englishman; he touched his cap to Godfrey.

"We have a mare as we don't hire

usually, acoss we wants a owner for her. She's too good for us all to pieces, and she's to be had cheap. She'd fetch a hundred or more in London, sir, and I fancy" — he winked knowingly — "you might get her here for a thousand francs, or thereabouts."

"I can look at her," said Brendon, carelessly, "but I never buy a horse till I have tried it myself."

The groom vanished into a dirty, dingy stable, at the back of the square courtyard.

He came back, leading a beautiful chestnut, faultless so far as Brendon could see, but fitter for a lady's horse than for his weight.

"There, sir, you won't match her easy."

"She's a pretty creature"—he patted the creature's lovely arched neck—"but she'll not carry me."

"Lord bless you, sir, she'll carry your weight twice over."

Godfrey again inspected her carefully.

He dearly loved horses, and already in the interest he felt in this new purchase, his heart had lightened, and the storm had left his face.

"I will buy her for Myra," he said to himself; "riding is just what she wants to raise her spirits."

CHAPTER XV.

NANCY AT HOME AGAIN.

It was a cold winter's day. The wind went whistling in and out among the branches in a surly tone, as if he felt it dull work not to have any leaves to fight his way through. But, cold as it was, Nancy sat at her needlework near the open door.

The work had fallen in her lap, and her eyes were fixed on the far-stretching moor. She looked fondly, wistfully, along the brown grass-fringed road on to the clump of pine-trees, gloomy now in the fast-fading daylight. She was trying to impress every detail of the scene on her mind,

for Nancy had resolved to quit Shallerton.

At first Rizpah made such an outcry that Nancy hesitated to deprive her of her old home; but through her friend, Miss Wackstead, Rizpah had heard of a good place, and Mr. Purton and her gossips at the post-office told her that she ought not to be a burden to Nancy.

"Though as to burden"—Rizpah was washing up every article of crockery on which she could lay her hands, with a kind of unexpressed conviction that all would henceforth be neglected — "I don't see which way it lies—seems to me Martha bore Mary's burden a deal more nor Mary bore Martha's. The cottage is Nancy's, true enough, and her pays for vittles and drink, but there it ends. How the gal is to live alone, and do for sheself's, beyond me. Well, I don't complain; Mat have

left I enough to bury I, and that's all I've got to look for. Mercy on us, life's made up of work, and feeding, and sleepin', and buryin'; there ain't much of change in it to they as works for the rest. It's uncommon like the bees; there's bees as is made a' puppose to work for drones, and it do seem as if I wur made for that—and Nancy—well, how her's to do alone beats I, that it do."

She came out of the little wash-house wiping her arms on her rough apron, and leaving them redder and more soap-glazed than ever.

"Well, Nance," she said, "I've got news for you."

"News for me!" There was weariness in Nancy's smile; her aunt's words called up the fact that the world had grown suddenly empty of all that had had interest for her.

"Well, I don't say as its pettiklar for you, my maid, unless it was for the account you used to take along o' they Purtons." Nancy's eyes left the moor, and fixed on Rizpah's face. The shining arms were set akimbo, and the black eyes were more bead-like than ever. "What should you say now if you was to hear of a marriage among the Purtons?"

Nancy grew suddenly white. She was so sick and giddy that the room and Rizpah seemed to be going round together.

"Who did you say?"

The faint tone sharpened Rizpah's black eyes. She ducked her head suddenly to one side, and took a considering look at her niece.

"Well, it do come out that it's been understood between theyselves this long time; but still Monday, and that with no warning, took my breath away, as if I'd

been a bursted bladder. I feel all any way yet—it comin' so sudden."

"Who told you?" Nancy's thoughts went at once to Clara Montgomery.

"Who told me? why, who should but the properest person so to do? So far as I hear it's to be a private wedding like—not a bridesmaid. Maybe she's folks think her might do better; but still it do seem lonely like, just only they two, and they're a-going away to Switzerland so soon as 'tis over."

Nancy's senses grew more and more confused. She wished her aunt would hold her peace, and yet there was a strange fascination in listening—but the next words roused her.

"Her wants you to go and see she."

Nancy raised her head proudly.

"Miss Montgomery wants to see me? I can't go; there's no occasion for it."

And then the warm blood came rushing back, and rose over face and throat and temples.

"Miss Montgomery!" — Rizpah's eyes and mouth tried which should be roundest —"My sakes! what's the gal's head running after? Didn't I tell, as plain as words could speak, as my friend Miss Wackstead's a-goin' to be married to Mr. Purton, come Monday, and 'tis to be kep' as quiet as quiet, so that Shallerton shan't know nothink. Him's a lucky man —I believe you—why, if her'd only waited her might ha' had the pick o' the neighbourhood."

"What does she want to see me for?"

"Bless yer heart, gal, do you think I ventures on asking impertinent questions? Her tells what's necessary, and that's enough for I. Where 'd be the use of I knowing more than my head 'ud carry?—

I should be safe to let it out. Her said, 'Tell your niece, Nancy, I shall be glad if her'd step up to Jassmine Bower as soon as possible: I have somethink petticklar to say;' and considerin' her's my friend, and how long we've known one another, I do think as you might be rather less back'ard, Nance, than what you seem in acceptin' she's invitation."

Nancy smiled with almost her old sprightliness.

"Well, but I'm going, aunt. I shall be very glad to do anything I can for your friend."

She got her hat and cloak, and was soon on her way to the cottage.

Rizpah's face puckered as she looked after her.

"Now what do her want of she? her ain't surely going to ask Nancy to be bridesmaid? I don't say as I'm fit—I

ain't got a sootable figure" — here she looked down at herself in her often-washed lilac print. She certainly looked very like an ill-made pincushion. "But I never hold with putting young heads over old ones; besides, I don't see as Nancy is sootable, seeing all as have happened."

Nancy found Miss Wackstead watering some plants outside the cottage windows, watering them with a certain long-drawn-out grace of movement that, united with her studied costume, gave one the idea that the spinster had an imaginary audience somewhere in the hawthorn hedge opposite.

She gave a pretty little cry of surprise when she saw her visitor.

"Oh, Miss Blane, so glad to see you. So kind of you to come up. Will you come in? Pray take a seat," she added, as soon as her visitor had gone indoors.

But as Nancy observed that her hostess

did not offer to shake hands, she remained standing.

Miss Wackstead had seen little of Nancy, but she had utterly failed in impressing Rizpah's niece with a sense of her superior position. Nancy's innate refinement, as well as her observation, had taught her at once that her aunt's friend was a pretender.

"Oh, do sit down—I want a talk with you—I so much want to know what your plans are."

Nancy smiled.

"My plans are very simple. You have been kind enough to help aunt to a situation, and I expect she and I will leave Shallerton about the same time."

"But have you found a situation? have you settled anything for yourself? You know, my dear, you are too young to live alone by yourself."

Nancy's calm impassible look settled on her face.

"I've been thinking what was best to be done under the circumstances and I sent for you," said Miss Wackstead, with her sweetest smile, "because I do feel so much for you, and so wish to help you. I thought, you know, among my London connection—it is very large and influential," she said, pensively, as if the grandeur of her belongings was a weight laid upon her, something to be borne whether she liked it or not—"I might place you very nicely. You would like to wait on a young lady better than an old one, I daresay; better for your spirits, poor dear, and I have quite a nice little plan in my head which will get you into your duties at once, and help you along beautifully."

"You are very kind, but——"

"Wait till I've done, dear." Miss Wackstead smiled and nodded to soothe down Nancy's impatient tone—to herself she said, "Poor thing, I'm afraid she's incurably abrupt and underbred. What I mean is this. I'll undertake to find you an undeniable situation, but, of course, you'll do much better in every way if you know your duties. Now I dare say you've heard," Miss Wackstead did not blush, but she thought she did, and drooped her eyelids in timid confusion, "that I am to be married on Monday; it's very hurried, I confess, but then Mr. Purton will have it so, and it leaves me no time to provide myself with a maid. Will you undertake the office? We shall be away for a month, and you will have the great advantage of going abroad, and also of being thoroughly taught how to wait on a lady."

Nancy smiled. At first she had felt

angry, but Miss Wackstead's little scheme amused her as it developed.

"I'm afraid I can't take advantage of your offer," she said, "because I am not thinking of service. My dear father has left me enough for all I want, and when the house and yard are sold I shall have plenty, thank you."

Miss Wackstead looked inquisitive.

"Then you positively mean to do nothing for your livelihood?"

Nancy smiled.

"I don't mean to be idle, but I have not planned anything; a way will perhaps be opened to me, but is there anything I can do for you, Miss Wackstead?"

Miss Wackstead was too courteous to persist: she shook her head and looked sad.

"Good-by," she said in a motherly tone; "you can post this letter for me, if you like.

You don't know the world yet, my dear. I only hope you may get on in it."

The words followed Nancy as she came into Snow Street; a dull echo in her heart repeated them. Did she know the world? Why, till that little corner of the curtain had been lifted which let in upon her consciousness the story of Miriam's marriage, how tranquil life had been. Had this been a sample of all that lay outside her home? and then Nancy thought of the two widows in the cottage beside the river; could life seem brighter and more peaceful than their life had seemed when she first saw Mrs. Hugh Llewellyn, and what did she know it to be? Full of heart-ache and bitterness, with shame and sorrow hanging over it like a cloud.

Nancy had resolved to start fresh, as she called it, among strangers; the rector of Shallerton had promised to find her a post

as village school-mistress, but he had told Nancy to say nothing of her plans to any one if she wished to sever herself from Shallerton. It was not for herself that the girl so longed to wipe out the past from her name. She still believed that Miriam would repent and return to her.

And when this hope grew strong the joy in Nancy's eyes would have made an observer think that some great pleasure was awaiting her, instead of the thought of sheltering her sorrowing sister in a far-off home. Meantime, what Nancy wanted was an object in life—some actual duty to carry her on from day to day.

She tried not to think of Robert, but it was hard; it seemed to her that among strangers, with nothing to remind her of all her hopes, it might be easier to throw herself into fresh interests; but now, passing by his father's house, she could not keep

him from her thoughts. He had followed her to Shallerton, and she had refused to speak with him, after the first few words; his look of reproachful sorrow haunted her. She walked fast down Snow Street and then on to the post-office.

She dropped Miss Wackstead's letter in the box. As she turned homewards, watchful Miss Topper caught sight of Nancy's hat.

"Nancy Blane—Nancy—stop," came in high-pitched shrillness from the parlour; then as Nancy faced round to the open window of the office, Miss Topper's voice sank to its usual hard tone. "Step in, will you, Nancy Blane? I've a word to say to you."

Nancy went in at the little side-door. Since her return from Buenos Ayres she had avoided all her neighbours, but especially Miss Topper and her conclave of gossips.

It was a relief when she reached the inner sanctum to find that Dorothy was alone.

"Nancy!" Miss Topper spoke severely, "what's this I hear about your going away? Now listen here: just put that nonsense on one side, my good girl, and get a little common sense in its place. Who do you suppose 'ull take to you as those have done who've known and respected you and your parents before you, and seen you born and grow? it's such a vain thing too; I just ask you, Nancy Blane, what there is about you to take the fancy of a stranger, if you hadn't, as I said before, the memory of your mother's looks and your father's worth, to trade on."

"I must take my chance," Nancy smiled; "hundreds of others have done it before me, you know."

"Chance—stuff, there ain't such a thing." Miss Topper could not endure resistance; she always liked to crush it at once—"I don't believe any one ever did such a foolish thing before as you're thinking of.

Sit ye down, Nancy Blane; I've not said half I've got to say; you're running away just because Robert Purton's cast you off on account of this scandal about Miriam, and I must tell you, Nancy, that if you'd been open and above board, and had trusted your best friends, such a thing might have been put a stop to; instead of which, nobody knows the rights of anything about you or Miriam either; whether she's married, or whether she's not"—here Dorothy shot a sharp look of inquiry at Nancy—"or—and I fear there's something in this last—whether she's gone astray."

Nancy flushed, but she did not satisfy her questioner.

"Well, Miss Topper," she said, "I know you've been kind to my aunt, and I daresay you mean well towards me; but you see I'm always slow at talking my affairs to others; but I'll tell you one thing,

the rector approves of my going away, so I can't be doing wrong, you know."

Miss Topper's mouth grew grimmer; as a public functionary she felt it was needful to show outward regard for the powers that be. She could not speak against the rector of Shallerton, but in her heart she decided that he was a tom-noddy.

She drew herself up stiffly.

"You know best of course, Nancy Blane; young women, so far as I see, always know best now-a-days for themselves and others too, for that matter—stay," she put aside Nancy's hand, "I didn't call for you only to give you advice. Here's a telegram for you, come just now, and there's been ne'er a one passing that I could send it down by. Who's it about, Nancy?"

"I'll see," and to Miss Topper's infinite disgust Nancy put the letter in her pocket.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE KNOT CUT.

MYRA had grown heart-sick of those ever-sounding musical chimes: there were four, one for each quarter of an hour, and at first they had soothed her; the very listening to them had wiled away the long weary waiting; but the morning had passed, and Godfrey had not come in as he always did to take her for a walk, and everything in the room and out of it grew hateful. Little by little the thought came, had Godfrey really meant his words; had he left her all alone in this foreign place to do the best she could?

The chimes came again cheerily as this thought was driving her distracted; she clasped her hands over her ears to keep out the sound.

There was no power of action in Myra. She had no thought of seeking Godfrey, of imploring him to forgive her, to take her again to his heart—only if Godfrey had really forsaken her, then she must sit still and die.

She sat there with her hands clasped over her ears till they ached with the pressure. She did not hear the sound of many voices in the little square, and then a hushed murmur that seemed to die away as if an enforced silence were suddenly laid on human outcry; she did not hear the stumbling heavy tread up the uneven wooden staircase of men bearing some unaccustomed weight. The heavy steps went on uncertainly along the gallery

outside her room, but after a while some one stopped at Myra's door and knocked.

"Entrez," she said, listlessly.

She had expected Rosalie the femme-de-chambre, but a stranger entered — a small man dressed in black, with a very shabby hat in his hand. Myra thought he had come to beg, and she looked vexed at this intrusion.

"My dear lady,"—he spoke in French, but he did not smile, he only looked stiff and solemn, Myra thought—"I have bad news for you: Monsieur your husband has been riding and his horse has fallen, and Monsieur has fallen also." Myra jumped up hurriedly and went towards the door, but the stranger stood in her way. "Madame, I am a surgeon, and it is my duty to tell you that your husband is ill—very ill—so ill that the slightest agitation must be spared him."

Myra looked wildly in the man's face, and she saw all the truth.

"He is dying, and you are keeping me away. Let me go. I will go to him."

The surgeon took a firm hold of her arm.

"Compose yourself, madame. Your husband is in my charge, not yours, and I will not permit you to see him until you are calm and reasonable. He may not recover, but assuredly he will linger hours, it may be days, if he is not troubled. Any agitation will produce a sudden stroke from which no power can rally him." He took out his watch and looked at it, still holding Myra's arm.

"In five minutes you can be calm if you please." He spoke courteously, then he let go her arm, and poured her out a glass of the cold water which stood on one of the tables.

Myra drank it, and then she clasped her hands and looked imploringly at him.

"I will be very good and quiet," she said, meekly — "only pray let me go to him."

"Yes, you may come, but you must not speak or try to make him recognize you in any way; you must be altogether silent."

Myra crept after the doctor like a frightened child.

They had laid Godfrey on a bed. But for his paleness, and the look of suffering round his mouth, he might have been asleep. The doctor looked at Myra, but she stood perfectly calm and still.

"Good," he said, gently; "I will stay till he opens his eyes, then I will tell you what to do."

The doctor had not been able to fulfil his promise; he was summoned away

before Brendon showed any sign of awakening.

When he was gone Myra sank on her knees and gave vent to the tears which had nearly stifled her — tears which showered down like rain, and sobs which shook her in convulsive shudderings as she knelt beside the bed.

"Oh, he will die, he will die," she sobbed, "and we parted unlovingly. Oh, Godfrey, you cannot die without forgiving me."

Hours went by, and at last, exhausted by her long watch, she fell asleep on her knees beside him.

She roused suddenly—the doctor was leaning over his patient—he did not move for some minutes.

"Madame," he said—he was trying to prevent her from seeing at once that her husband was conscious—"monsieur wishes

for a letter; you must help me look for it if you please, madame." He pointed to Godfrey's coat which he had himself removed.

Myra followed him to where the coat lay; she found the letter, and gave it to the doctor.

"Myra"—Godfrey's eyes were open, and were fixed on her—the doctor raised his hand in warning, but Myra only saw Godfrey's wistful look. She flung her arms round him, and hid her face beside him.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Women are fools always," he said to himself; but he did not interfere. He called Myra aside after a while, and told her how to proceed in his absence. Then he went away to execute his patient's wish. Godfrey Brendon had asked him to summon his mother.

Presently Godfrey spoke again.

"Read me the letter, darling; I can't move this hand at all."

Myra looked at him anxiously, and her face grew brighter. To her unpractised eyes it seemed impossible that death could be near while Godfrey spoke so much like himself.

She gave a slight shiver when she saw Mrs. Llewellyn's writing.

"It is from your mother. Shall I read it now, or shall I wait till you are better?"

A strange awful chill came into his eyes.

"Better! The doctor should have told you," he said. "I made him tell me just now." He stopped—the look in his eyes frightened her; she uttered a faint cry—"My poor darling," he said, again, "read me the letter."

She was so accustomed to obey his

slightest wish that the words acted like a charm. The spasm that had come into her face was smoothed away, and she forced herself into stillness. There was no time to think of self; she must do all she could for him; she dared not even think how little that might be.

Only the trembling fingers as they unfastened the envelope told how she was suffering.

"'MY DEAR GODFREY,—

"'I HAVE at last traced you to Belgium, and I write this same letter to every town that you are likely to visit. My dear boy, you know I could not be angry with you if I tried to be so, but I am seriously unhappy and anxious. Is this story they tell me true? Is poor Myra your wife or is she not? I try hard not to judge you unheard. But it seems to me

you would scarcely have left us all in this sudden way, and have been so careful to conceal your destination, unless you were afraid of some discovery. You will know from this that I have been to London and have seen Mr. Featherstone. Just a mere chance told me you were in Belgium; a letter from you was brought to him while I was in his office, and I saw the hand-writing and the postage-stamp before he could conceal either, so he is not to blame. Now I ask you this, if you really love Myra, surely you look on her——'

"Godfrey, darling, I'll stop here; there is no good in reading you any more—it is all so uncomfortable." He looked at her earnestly, and he saw the agony in her face.

"Hold it here close under my eyes, child, and I will try to make it out."

She did as he bade her—her heart beat fast as she watched the deep flush that rose in his face, and then the deadly paleness that followed, but he was reading still, and she dared not take the letter away.

"Take it—read it yourself," he said, presently. Myra took the letter and tried to read it, but the lines twisted themselves together. She saw that Mrs. Llewellyn reproached her son for his conduct, both towards her and towards his wife, and then she saw some earnest words about the sanctity of marriage, but nothing had any sense for her till she came near the end. "Send Myra to me. I will gladly come and fetch her. She shall live where and as she pleases, but she must live apart from you; and, as your mother, I tell you this is the only means you have left of atoning for what you have done." Myra crushed up the letter in her hand.

"You will not try to send me away, darling; I would not go if you did. I am yours now for ever. Godfrey, darling, you could not send me away."

The agony seemed to have passed from her face to his. She bent down to kiss him but he made a feeble movement from her.

"No, no, my mother is right; leave me, child, while you can. I am fast leaving you."

His eyelids closed — unconsciousness came again like heavy slumber.

Myra burst into tears. This new agony blotted out the sense of Godfrey's danger.

"I will not leave him—I will not. I have given up everything; he cannot send me away. I would not go to his mother if I had to beg my bread. Oh, Godfrey, my own Godfrey, tell me you did not mean to send me away. Kiss me, my own, own darling, only once."

She bent over him and kissed him, but the pale lips did not return her passionate love—the heavy eyelids remained sealed.

"He is asleep," Myra said, sadly, and she sat to watch for his awakening.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT LAST.

NANCY roused with a sudden start. She had been travelling for many hours almost without pause, and she had kept her eyes and her mind awake, but in the short transit from the last terminus to the hotel she had fallen into a heavy slumber.

"Now, my dear."

Her arm was gently shaken, and Mrs. Llewellyn was trying to awaken her.

"I'm very sorry." Nancy opened her eyes widely; she followed into an entrance full of light, and eager voices in an unknown tongue buzzed round her. Mrs.

Llewellyn was talking very loud, as if she thought that the English-speaking waiter, who had come forward to her assistance, was of necessity deaf. Nancy felt in a dream; it seemed a week ago since she received the telegram from Mrs. Llewellyn, asking her to meet her in London and to journey thence to Brussels in search of Miriam; but it was only yesterday that she had paid that visit to Miss Wackstead and to Dorothy Topper, and had so dismayed Rizpah by her sudden departure for London. But Nancy's intense desire for the long-delayed meeting had exhausted her more than the journey had, and she felt dull and insensible as she looked round her in the Flemish hotel.

Presently Mrs. Llewellyn beckoned her to follow; they went up some stairs along a gallery, and at last into a room.

A small thin gentleman stood in the

midst of the dimly-lit room, and he came up eagerly to Mrs. Llewellyn as if he had been waiting for her.

He spoke in French, and Nancy waited anxiously, while Mrs. Llewellyn listened and questioned.

She turned slowly round. Her face struck a chill to Nancy's hopes. "It is over; my dear, we are too late. There is only your poor sister to care for now."

But Mrs. Llewellyn's quivering lips contradicted the steadiness of her words. Nancy felt that Miriam was close to her at last; but she could not think of Miriam just then. She drew a chair forward, placed Mrs. Llewellyn gently in it, and then she stood beside her pressing the cold hands in her own, with eyes full of tender sympathy.

The doctor looked at Nancy and said a few words, but she shook her head.

"I cannot speak English," he said, "but the good sister in there is a countrywoman of yours. I will call her."

He passed into a room adjoining, and came back with a "sœur de charité."

Nancy looked at the strange dress, and shrank away with dislike. She had a prejudice against Roman Catholics.

The sister curtsied and looked at both the strangers, and then her long-trained sympathies told her what to do.

"Madame will like to come with me," she said, "and Mademoiselle will prefer to go to Madame Brendon. I hope seeing you, Mademoiselle, may make her cry. She has not cried since she knew the truth."

She looked so pityingly at Nancy that the girl felt surprised. In the two days which the sister had spent with Miriam, she had learned the relations between the

young widow and Nancy, and how little sympathy existed between them.

The doctor departed, and then the sister asked Mrs. Llewellyn to follow her.

"You," she said to Nancy, "will find Madame Brendon in there whenever you like to go to her."

She did not tell Nancy that Miriam had said she would not see her sister or Mrs. Llewellyn. She pointed to an opposite door, and then took Godfrey Brendon's mother to the room where he had died.

Nancy went to the door and gently opened it.

A lamp burned on a table in the midst, and by its light she saw a figure crouched on a sofa, at the farthest corner of the long narrow room, so hidden away in the darkness that but for the white dressing-gown in which it was wrapped it would not have been easily discernible.

Nancy had gone into the room, her heart full of yearning tenderness to her poor desolate sister; but Miriam raised herself at the sound of a footstep and swept the loosened hair from her face, and at the graceful petulant movement, so unchanged from the days of Miriam's old childish empire, Nancy's loyal reverence returned; she had no longer to protect her sister, only to serve and obey her with the fondest devotion.

Nancy knelt down by the couch.

"My darling!" and then she took the hand that hung listlessly beside the unhappy girl in both her own and kissed it fondly. Miriam trembled. She shrank away from Nancy into the corner of the sofa. She was at war with every living thing. It seemed as if any comfort to her anguish would be treason to Godfrey.

"You mean kindly, Nancy"—she kept

her head turned away, as if by instinct, from those deep, loving eyes, "but you did not know him—you never loved him —and you tried to take me from him."

But Nancy's love was too mighty—too overpowering in its intensity—to suffer one thought of self to rise.

"Kiss me, Miriam dear," she said; "your sorrow is too hard for you to bear alone, let poor old Nance do something for you."

The girl had not shed a tear, but now, as Nancy's arms came softly round her—softly at first, and then holding her in a firm clasp, nature yielded: Miriam let her fair head sink on her sister's shoulder, and she broke into bitter weeping—that terrible sorrow so much harder in its agony for the long previous repression.

Nancy sat beside her, holding her as if she were an infant. She did not try to

check the agony which was at last finding utterance. She only sat still, thinking how Miriam must have loved the man against whom her own feelings had been so harsh. Once or twice she pressed her lips fondly to the golden hair that streamed over her own bosom; but till the sobs grew less vehement she let grief have its way. So they sat, for how long Nancy could not guess, till the sobs grew into deeply drawn breaths, till these lulled, and Miriam lay, still at last, with eyes closed, in her sister's arms.

Mrs. Llewellyn looked in, but Nancy motioned her away. She could only study Miriam now, all else must yield to the poor stricken lamb she treasured so fondly.

The tears came gently at last, and Miriam raised her head.

"You are very kind to me, Nancy, but

I have no love to give back in exchange. I can never care again for any one living —my heart—"—her face quivered, so that Nancy feared a fresh agony of sorrow— "is quite cold and dead. I shall never feel any more."

Nancy did not answer: how could Miriam love her or forgive her yet for trying to separate her from Godfrey Brendon? The loyal heart felt guilty of this terrible sorrow, for she had tried to part Miriam from Brendon as effectually as they were now parted. The very consciousness that she could never sympathize in the affection that had so bound her sister to the dead man quickened the warmth of her own affection. Her heart urged her on to a still greater devotion to supply this one lack. Nancy had no thought of ever convincing Miriam of her error, or of the misery that might have

befallen her had Godfrey Brendon lived. She had found her darling sister, the light of her father's eyes, stricken down with sorrow; henceforth she had only to try and heal the wounds which had been inflicted on her, and Nancy's simple creed for healing was love.

"You must go to bed, darling," she said, "and I will stay by you if you will let me."

And when she had undressed the weary heart-broken girl, Nancy established herself in a chair by the bedside. It seemed a reward of all her service when Miriam said:

"Don't leave me alone, Nancy dear."

At first her thoughts were all of Miriam, and how she could best soothe and comfort her. Henceforth Nancy accepted this without any deliberation. Her life must be Miriam's, to live where and how her

much-injured sister chose to live. No thought of the old terms of sisterly equality came to Nancy; but then she and Miriam had, to her thinking, never been equal, and now Miriam was a lady who must be waited on and tended as if she were still the wife of Godfrey Brendon—for Nancy let the word "wife" stand. "It is all over," she said. "There is no one to question the marriage, and why should she be ever vexed any more over it?" One thing was clear, they must never return to Shallerton. Nancy wondered at the sharp pang she felt. What had she left to regret in Shallerton? She roused herself from the doze which had come over her senses, and looked at Miriam. Her face was pale, but she slept calmly, except that every now and then a sob broke in on the quiet breathing, and told that sorrow was not forgotten, even in sleep.

Nancy strove to keep her thoughts on her sister, but she could not. Another thought was rising with a power she could not resist. She tried hard against it. She went to Mrs. Llewellyn's room and bade her good-night, and in the hard-set, rigid sorrow on that firm old face she saw even a more bitter grief than Miriam's.

"My dear,"—Mrs. Llewellyn made no other reference to her dead son,—"as soon as we get back I shall advise Mrs. Hugh to send her boy to school; she is a wiser judge for him than I am. Nancy, I hope our poor dear Myra will see me to-morrow. She is my child as much as she is your sister."

She drew Nancy down to her, and kissed her.

"Go back to her, Nancy. I am best alone."

There was something sacred to Nancy

in the mother's calm : she left her without a word.

Miriam had not stirred, and there were many hours yet before morning. Nancy shrank from them now, as she had not shrunk when she began her vigil.

It had been a hard fight at Shallerton to keep from thinking of Robert Purton ; but then there had always been the hope and the anxiety about Miriam to turn to whenever the longing to recall her lover had grown beyond Nancy's power to cope with. But this was ended. She had found Miriam ; and it seemed to Nancy that her real parting from Robert Purton was only practically begun now. The living stain on her name was removed ; but how could Miriam ever endure to live with those who loved, as Nancy knew better than ever that she loved, Robert Purton ?

"She could not bear it; it would be torture every hour of her life. No; Miriam has only me now, and I must live her life. Father would have wished it so."

But Robert! Had she the right to sacrifice him? She thought over the brief meeting she had had with him, when he had followed her to Shallerton, and she had forbidden his presence at the cottage. How every word, every look was recalled over and over again by Nancy now. She remembered that Robert had said he could not live without her.

"But I gave him no hope. I told him it would be sinful to waste his whole life in a vain waiting, for then I thought that I might never find Miriam, and that the disgrace would never leave us. He was angry when he left me; but he has made no further effort to see me. Why should I think I am sacrificing him? I do not

say he will marry Miss Montgomery; but Robert has only to choose."

She bowed her face into her hands, and sobbed quietly.

"I cannot help it—I cannot; it may be wrong, God only knows if it is. Whether Robert marries another girl or stays single I must go on loving him, and longing to be his wife. I know it is selfish, but I can't help it —I can't. When I try to make myself say I can give up Robert for Miriam it is just as if I was tearing the heart out of my body."

So the night went on, brooding darkly over the sorrowing family — sorrow in different shapes, yet piercing into the inmost soul of each: softened, it may be, to the two who, in the midst of their anguish, yet knew how to ask for help to bear it—a help of which they felt more need than did the newly-made widow, who lay sleeping in sheer despair.

Rest came at last, even to Nancy. When Mrs. Llewellyn stole into the room in the morning she found Nancy sleeping quietly in the chair by Miriam's bedside.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. PURTON'S WEDDING TRIP.

MIRIAM had begged to be spared any private talk till after the funeral, but when this was over there was no excuse for further delay, and Nancy left her sister alone with Mrs. Llewellyn.

"My dear"—Mrs. Llewellyn spoke so softly and tenderly that Miriam was surprised: she had dreaded this interview, and tried to avoid it, but the tender tone went to the girl's heart; she realized for the first time, since she had left Fernside, that this stern-looking woman was Godfrey's mother —"My dear, you are coming home with me, are you not?"

"Please don't ask me,"—Miriam's words came in a sort of wail—"I can never go back to live with you. Oh, Mrs. Llewellyn, how can I go where I might hear him blamed? You would not blame me, I know that, but your daughter-in-law, Mrs. Hugh, how can I ever face her again?"

"My dear, Norah will probably leave me, and I am sure you would never hear an unkind word from her. You and she will understand each other much better now."

Miriam made a restless movement. She hated Norah's name, and the idea of living under the same roof was too painful to be listened to.

"Please do not ask me"—she clasped her hands and looked so piteously at Mrs. Llewellyn, out of her soft, sweet blue eyes, that the old lady felt guilty, and spoke less urgently.

"I will not ask you to do anything painful, my dear child, only you cannot be left to yourself; and it seems to me that as Norah and I are both widows you can find more sympathy with us than with new-married people like Robert and Nancy."

Miriam put both hands up to her forehead, and pushed the straggling hair out of her eyes.

"Robert and Nancy"—she spoke in a dull weary voice, as if it were a lesson she was trying to repeat—"is Nancy going to marry Robert Purton?"

Mrs. Llewellyn's eyebrows went up in a kind of wonder. There are people in the world so generous in their appreciation that they are not content till they have made others share it. Bit by bit, partly from Norah, and partly by cross-questioning Nancy herself, Mrs. Llewellyn had found out her story, and the shadow which

Miriam's marriage had cast upon Nancy's life. It seemed to her only fair and just that the one sister should know the devotion of the other.

"I don't quite know how they stand towards one another now, my dear; but they were engaged to be married just before this news—the news, you know what I mean, my poor dear child—that came about you."

A bright flush came into Miriam's face, but she sat erect, and looked firmly at Mrs. Llewellyn.

"How could that affect Nancy's engagement? Did Robert Purton give her up?"

Miriam's lips curled as she thought of the strength of her own love.

"No, indeed" — Mrs. Llewellyn felt inclined to be angry, but she checked herself as she looked at Miriam's swollen

eyelids, and the hopelessness in the eyes themselves—"his father interfered—he is a hard, purse-proud man, I fancy, and Nancy too has a proud spirit, and between them they have both been made miserable. But, my dear child, you ought to know what Nancy has done for you."

Miriam listened with an unmoved face to the story of Nancy's adventures, and Mrs. Llewellyn felt impatient at her indifference.

"Well," she said, "it isn't every sister who would give up her own happiness as Nancy has for you."

Miriam shook her head.

"I cannot feel grateful," she said, sadly. "Nancy only wanted to take me from Godfrey. You think me very wicked—perhaps I am, but I cannot pretend to feel what I don't feel. I could never, never have left him of my own will, so how

can I love Nancy for trying to take me away ?"

She broke down at this, and hid her face on the sofa.

Mrs. Llewellyn was disturbed. She had thought it would be easy to make this soft yielding creature see things in the right way, but she could not insist. Something in the sweet childlike face — the docile helpless manner—controlled the old lady's despotic will in a way that surprised herself.

Presently Miriam looked up.

"Don't think me worse than I am. I am not so bad as I seem"—she tried to smile, such a sickly little attempt that it brought smarting tears to Mrs. Llewellyn's eyes—"I do love and honour Nancy dearly for all she has done, and I hope now, that I am no longer a hindrance, she will be happy with Robert Purton; but Nancy and

I could not be together, even if she were alone in the world. She would always think me wicked, and if I am wicked I can't help it—at least not yet."

"My dear"—Mrs. Llewellyn bent down and kissed her—"Nancy has never thought you wicked. You are too suffering and unhappy to be judged, or even to judge yourself; but you cannot live alone, my poor child."

"Oh, no"—Miriam shuddered. "I could not be alone; but the sœur has told me of a convent here where I can have a home. She has talked a good deal to me, and it seems to me that her religion offers more refuge for a person in my condition than ours does. I have never thought much of such things at all," she said, with a weary sigh, "and so it is easier for me to make the change."

Mrs. Llewellyn begged and reasoned,

and warned, but Miriam remained firm. She asked that she might be spared the pain of telling Nancy herself, for she knew the blow would be very painful. She only entreated that her sister would not attempt remonstrance.

"My mind is made up," she said.

And Mrs. Llewellyn told Nancy. At first it was hard to persuade her not to remonstrate, but the words, "You will only distress her, my dear," acted like a talisman. Nancy yielded her own will in this as in all that concerned her sister.

And when Mrs. Llewellyn had made every necessary provision for Miriam's comfort and support, it seemed to her wiser to part the sisters.

Miriam had striven against the reserve she felt, but still it had not melted, though, since her sister's decision had been told to Nancy, she had been tenderer than ever.

Now when the time came to say good-by Miriam flung herself into Nancy's arms in an agony of sorrow.

"Forgive me—forgive me, Nancy, darling. I know all your great love, all you have done and given up for me, but my heart is dead, Nancy—it seems as if all the love it had was buried with him. Try not to think me wicked, dear; indeed I shall learn to be patient by-and-by, and perhaps some day I may grow more like you, and be of some use to others beside myself."

"God bless and guide you, my darling," was all Nancy's answer, and then Mrs. Llewellyn summoned her out of the quiet convent parlour.

The journey home was very silent. Mrs. Llewellyn was inclined to be disappointed at the way in which Nancy gave herself up to quiet grief. It seemed to her

that her own sorrow was far heavier than Nancy's, there was so little hope in it.

"I must try to think of Norah and Hugh," she said; "school will bring that boy right—we have spoiled him among us—and he will learn to value his mother when he has not got her at his beck and call."

When they reached Folkestone, there was a short delay before the departure of the London train.

There were several groups in the large room of the hotel—some of them arrivals by the steamer, pale weary creatures; and others who were in readiness to cross by the evening boat.

Among them, Mrs. Llewellyn recognized Mr. Purton, but he was at some distance, and she did not wish him to see Nancy.

"I wonder who that smart lady is he was talking to?" she said to herself, as she and Nancy took their places in the train.

"She has been pretty some time ago, and she knows it. He can't be so silly as to think of marrying, and yet he had all the look of it, and the lady certainly might be a bride."

Miss Wackstead—she is Mrs. Purton now—does look very bride-like. She has a youthful bonnet on, and a general air of being just out of her teens, and conscious of having taken her first decided step in life.

While she adjusts her veil for about the twentieth time, Mr. Purton's attention is attracted to a lady and gentleman and their family, two grown-up daughters, and a son, a boy of fifteen, who have just come into the room. The cause of his attraction is not to be found in the outside appearance of these new-comers, who are about the most unpretentious and quiet-looking of the people in the room; but in the fact that a much more showy-looking person has just addressed the mother of

the group as "your ladyship," and has received a bunch of keys with something like a curtsey.

Mr. Purton rubs his hands softly. This kind of association is so pleasant. It is what he has been longing for. Dear me, who knows that in the course of his tour he may find himself intimate with some of those aristocratic friends his wife speaks of with such a charming mixture of regret and reticence?

"She'll tell me more as time goes on," he says. "While she was poor and unprotected her pride forbade her to claim them; but now it is quite a different thing. She is an orphan, poor thing, and has no near relatives; but a rich woman who rides in her own carriage need never be afraid claiming acquaintance with titled friends."

He looked at his wife to attract her

attention, and then moved as close as he could to "her ladyship." The rest of the crowd had lost all attraction for Mr. Purton. As he stood beside "her ladyship's" husband he felt refined and exalted.

Mrs. Purton had obediently followed her husband's beckoning glance; and as she reached him he nudged her and whispered, "quite distinguished people, my dear."

Mrs. Purton looked, and then she grew suddenly pale. She made an impulsive movement to return to where she had been sitting, but it was too late.

The boy darted forwards, exclaiming, "Why, it is Wackstead, I declare: how d'ye do? why have you never been to see us all this while? I say, Mary—Georgie—here's Wacky!"

"Wacky!" Mr. Purton stood speechless. The room began to dance round

him with the excitement of the moment. He saw the young ladies come forward and shake hands with his wife. He saw the father and mother nod to her in the kindly pleasant way which instinct told him was addressed to an inferior, and yet he would not believe his own eyes.

"Friends of yours, my dear?" he said in his blandest voice; "introduce me, pray. Delighted, I'm sure, to meet my wife's friends." This with a bow, and his hand half held out to "her ladyship."

But "her ladyship" only looked gravely at him. The boy gave him a saucy school-boy smile, and turned his back on him at once.

"I say, come here, Wackstead, do come here." He had got the hapless woman by the arm, and was dragging her off from Mr. Purton. "I've been wanting to see you awfully. You told me once you

had a recipe for growing whiskers; and mamma's maid's an awful muff. She knows nothing. Come in this corner and tell me it quietly."

Mr. Purton tried hard to keep down his look of dismay. The two young ladies smiled.

"Wackstead should have told us of her marriage," their mother said. Then, turning to Mr. Purton, "Your wife is quite an old friend of ours; she lived with us for more than twelve years."

"Oh, yes — she — she was your governess?" faltered Mr. Purton.

"Well, no." The lady smiled. "She was with Lord Winton's sister till she died, Lady Mary Sarum. She has told you of her, no doubt?"

Mr. Purton was choked. He bowed to this lady, to her husband, and the young ladies, but he could not utter a syllable.

He cast a hurried glance to the corner where the boy had dragged his wife; and as he saw her cowed, terrified face, he felt how he had been duped, and he shivered at the derision which awaited him in Shallerton.

"A maid, only a maid—good heavens!" he thought. "I'd better have married Lettice Lovage."

And he could not have it out at once with his wife. Already he felt that attention had been drawn to them; he must keep cool and dignified spite of all. He took no more notice of the distinguished group, he put his hands in his pockets and walked to the farther end of the long room.

In the almost brutal anger that rose against his wife he saw how much of her attraction had lain in her supposed position; he had almost cursed himself for the easy

way in which he had believed in her. She had baffled all inquiry by describing herself as an orphan without any near relative, and she had said that poverty had alienated her from her aristocratic friends.

Misfortune had been hitherto unknown to Mr. Purton; in familiar phrase "the black ox had never trodden on his foot." He had loved his first wife so little, and there had been so little sympathy between them, that her death had been rather a release than a sorrow; and now that misfortune should come to him in the shape of disgrace, was intolerable; he would not, he could not bear it. He fought against the indignity thus foisted on him till it grew distorted and exaggerated, and he considered his wife almost in the light of a felon.

"Take her to Paris—a likely joke; and have to go over in the same boat, and

undergo the confounded patronage of those employers of hers. By George, I swear I won't—I'll forfeit the tickets sooner!"

He seated himself and affected to be absorbed in a newspaper; but all the time he was furtively conscious of all that took place at the farther end of the room. He saw that his wife was alone now, and then he watched the family, which had grown so intolerable in his eyes, rise and go out of the room. But he made no attempt to approach Mrs. Purton.

"It is her place to conciliate me," he said; and a red flush mounted on his dark face as he remembered the homage she had hitherto exacted from him. He knew, though he would not own it to himself, that he had been afraid of her—actually nervous as to the correctness of his tie, or his mode of expression; he had been living in an atmosphere of restraint

and false shame, and this sudden awakening had completely upset his balance.

"Confound her!" he muttered. "I was as free as air, and here I am saddled with an underbred vain noodle, who, I know, is ten years older than she owns to into the bargain. She shall pay for it!" he said, savagely, and he plunged his head again between the sheets of his paper.

He sat a long time, not very conscious of the meaning of the printed words—his own thoughts being far weightier in their appeal to his attention. He was conscious at last of a general stir around him, and that the space in front of the table was clear, but he would not look up. He was resolved to avoid any appearance of seeking his wife.

"She ought to beg pardon on her knees" had been his last reflection.

"Mr. Purton—"

He looked round hastily. His wife's voice was sweet and calm as usual, but there was no imploring sound in it. She looked too, he thought, much as usual; but his heavy frown seemed to startle her smile away.

"The Boulogne boat will be starting soon. Almost every one has gone on board to be in readiness." Her refined smooth speech restrained him in spite of himself; he was obliged to look away as he answered:

"What's that to me?" he said, rudely. "I'm not going to travel with your master and mistress."

The colour rose in Mrs. Purton's face, and with it came a supreme look of disgust.

"I think, Mr. Purton, we will postpone this discussion till we are without witnesses," she said, gravely, glancing at the three or four persons still scattered about

the room. "You see," she said, in a very low voice, "I have been used to *gentlemen* all my life, and they never discuss private matters in public."

Mr. Purton said something which his wife affected not to hear. She would not acknowledge that she had married a man capable of swearing at her; but she grew rather pale.

She felt a little dismayed in her heart when the loiterers went away, one after another, and she and her husband were left alone, but she kept calm outwardly.

Even then he did not speak.

Mrs. Purton hesitated. There was still time to go on board the boat, but she shrank from again approaching the subject. She glanced up at her husband. His sulky face restored her self-possession.

"He cannot behave worse than he has done," she thought; "and one holds men

at advantage when they behave ill—they are always more penitent after than a woman is."

"We have time still to go to the steamer; but if we delay we shall lose it."

The flush on Mr. Purton's dark pale face made him look so unnatural that her heart beat very quickly till he answered.

"You don't seem to understand plain words," he sneered. "I am not going to cross this evening. I am not going abroad at all."

Mrs. Purton did not answer. She was very feminine, but she had no feminine love of irritation.

He began to walk up and down the room. Mrs. Purton sat still, with her hands in her lap.

At last he came to a full stop just in front of her.

"I tell you what it is, I consider myself

extremely ill-used," he said. "I consider that you have perpetrated a most daring fraud. You know well enough that a man of my — my circumstances and position would not dream of marrying beneath himself; and you always gave me to understand that you were a lady, that you had titled friends, and so on — you are nothing but an impostor."

"I do not remember to have ever told you that I was a lady"—Mrs. Purton's voice was calmer and sweeter than ever, in contrast to her husband's sharp jerked-out words — "I have always been among gentlemen and ladies, and I have not found my manner different to theirs, and I have been always well treated; but, Mr. Purton, I have as much right to complain as you have. You told me you married me for myself—that you loved me."

She gave a little sob, and put her hand-

kerchief to her eyes; even then she was self-controlled and gentle. Mr. Purton grew fidgety; he pushed his fingers rapidly through his hair. This plea was hard to answer.

"I've got no sentiment about me," he said, roughly. "Do you suppose a man feels the same when he has been deceived? Suppose I'd deceived you?"

Mrs. Purton looked up cheerfully and gave a little laugh.

"I don't want to vex you"—she spoke so pleasantly and easily, that try as he would, he felt her superiority—"but have you not deceived me?—do you not deceive yourself? Why,"—as she saw she was gaining ground — her laugh grew more decided, and he winced—"do you suppose I don't know the whole truth of your acquaintance with those Blanes? I saw through *you* from the first, and I was quite

amused when you said Nancy was not a fit wife for your son. But then I know every man has his weak point, and I was willing to overlook yours for your other good qualities." She kept her eyes on his face, and she saw it soften. "My dear"—she put her hand gently on his arm—"have a little worldly wisdom. If you keep your own counsel who is the wiser? if you quarrel with me your Shallerton friends will ask the reason. You have only got to forget everything you don't choose to remember, and to take me as you find me."

Mr. Purton grunted, but he stood still.

"Do you know, John"—she looked up in her most winning fashion—"if I had thought you could be such a bear as you were just now, I think I should have kept my freedom. I was very happy in Jasmine Bower — you always seemed to have

good manners and to be gentlemanly there —I never thought I should have to blush for you."

He drew his arm away.

"You'd better blush for yourself," he said sulkily.

"If you can prove me unladylike I will, but if you want to keep friends with me shake hands, and do try and be what I thought you. I know a gentleman when I see him, and I shall begin to think you a complete impostor if you go on so— I shall, indeed."

She drew herself a little away, and settled her veil.

Mr. Purton was not melted, but he was softened, and he admired his wife's readiness. It seemed wiser to enlist this for himself than to provoke her to use it against him; they were married; there was no help for it; he really liked his wife,

and let her be what she would, she had all the pretty little ways which he considered the essentials of a lady.

He turned and held out his hand awkwardly, like a sulky schoolboy.

"There's hardly a man in ten thousand who would forgive such a deception," he said.

"Then I am sorry for the men, dear," and Mrs. Purton looked so very charming that her husband felt foolish and docile all at once.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT NIGHT.

HUGH had listened silently to the announcement that he was to go to school as soon as his preparations could be completed. He had asked his mother's pardon in a sullen formal way on the evening of his outbreak, but no explanation had passed between them.

The days had gone by rapidly, and Norah's heart ached at the thought of parting from her boy. He did not seem to love her as he had done in the old days before Godfrey Brendon came to trouble their peace, but yet he seemed to care to be with her. Norah missed his fond petting

worship — missed it as mothers do miss their boys' tenderness; but she believed that Hugh's love for her was unchanged, and that only some childish notion of manly dignity restrained him.

Hugh was to start early on the morrow; his grandmother's return was left undecided, and in the letter announcing her son's death Mrs. Llewellyn urged Norah not to delay Hugh's departure for school. Norah was greatly shocked; she told Hugh gently what had happened, and then she handed the letter to him without comment. She could give her boy the sympathy he craved now, no fear of Godfrey's direful influence; and in the sudden revulsion it seemed as if she had been hard and unjust. It seemed too as if she were unnatural and wanting in sympathy with Mrs. Llewellyn's grief. She went away quietly while Hugh sat reading.

The boy drew a deep breath, and began the letter afresh. He fidgeted and rubbed the cuff of his jacket over his eyes as if something clouded them. He could not take in the truth of his uncle's death. Then, with a sharp cry, like a dumb creature in agony, he flung his arms on the table and buried his curly head between them.

"Oh, uncle—poor uncle Godfrey—and to die without grandmother. How could I die without my mother?" and then he sobbed convulsively.

Hugh's grief was more like a man's than a child's. He was giving vent to the pent-up sorrow which he had so long hardened himself against. His uncle's death was, doubtless, the immediate cause of his agony, but Hugh knew and owned to himself that the heart-ache that remained was more for the estrangement that had grown up between him and his darling

mother than for any other grief. His memory brought back with poignant sharpness the loving way they had lived together before his uncle's arrival.

"It's too late now," he said, as he rubbed his eyes till they looked inflamed and swollen. "Nobody loves me now. Grandmother said, before she went away, I was growing too hard for any one to love me. I can't love grandmother as I used. But then mother is different, she is, oh so loving;" and the remembrance of those evening talks, and of the fond words and kisses that had gone with them, overpowered Hugh afresh, and he gave way to quieter tears.

Not for long. He flamed up in a sudden indignation at himself.

"I'm a fine fellow—I am—to think of going to a public school, and to sit here and blub like a girl; though I'm not so sure girls do blub easily. Clara doesn't, I

know. Even when uncle Spenser took her away against her will she smiled and seemed quite pleased to go. No, it's done now, and I can't help it. I shan't say anything about being sorry to mother. She'd make me blub again perhaps, and I couldn't before her—fellows don't—but I'll get a good character at school and write her no end of jolly letters, and then we shall be all right again by the holidays."

In pursuance of which resolution he was so bright and cheerful when he met his mother again, that Norah thought he could not, after all, have cared much for his uncle Godfrey. "He is decidedly glad to go to school," she said to herself, "and I ought to be thankful for it."

All day long she battled with herself—she longed to put her arms round Hugh and ask him to be to her as he was last year—and then the strange reserve he

had lately shown checked her, and she feared to widen the breach between them by any such attempt.

It seemed to her that Hugh was wholly taken up with indifferent subjects; he talked incessantly, and she fancied he kept his eyes purposely from her face when she spoke.

And so he did. Every tone of her sweet refined voice came like a reproach to him for having slighted her for others, till, in the afternoon, he could no longer bear it.

"I must go up and say good-by to old Dawson," he said; "don't wait tea, mother."

He was gone before she answered.

Poor Norah, this was confirmation even beyond her fears. Her boy was not only glad to leave her, but he preferred to shorten the little time they had to spend together.

Till to-day she had had much to think of and to care for in preparing for his hurried departure; but the packing was ended, and she had so counted on this last evening alone with Hugh.

"I have a right to it," she said sadly. "Ah! but when one has to claim affection as a right I fear it is too late to recall it."

Norah was beset too with anxieties as to the nameless perils and trials which she dreaded for Hugh in his school-life.

"He is so handsome and frank that he is sure to make friends, and then he is so impetuous that he is likely to make unsafe ones; and he has no father to warn him against the dangers, and I have lost my influence; still I must speak—I must do my duty let what will happen."

The evening passed sadly. At past eight o'clock Hugh came in.

"I don't want anything—I'm tired, and

I think I had better go to bed. Good-night, mother."

Hugh had so dreaded this moment; already it seemed to him he was giving way.

He bent down sideways and gave a fragment of his cheek to be kissed.

Norah put her arms round him and held him fast.

"Hugh, I want to speak to you." She cleared her throat, and spoke in a constrained voice. "You see, dear, you are going to school for the first time, and there are some things I should like to warn you against."

"Thank you, mother." He slipped out of her arms. "I've had all that from Dawson; he has been preaching me a regular sermon about everything, down to lollipops; so he's saved you trouble, you see," he went on gravely. "Dawson's been

a public-school-fellow himself; so of course he knows; and, mother, you were never even at a girls' school."

"No, but I am your mother, Hugh, and I ought to remind you."

Hugh stooped and kissed her forehead.

"Good-night, mother; I promise you, I'll say my prayers regularly, even if I'm laughed at; but I want to go to bed now."

He kissed her again, and she let him go.

She was wholly unsatisfied, but she knew him too well to try to force his confidence.

"Boys are just like plants," thought poor Norah, sorrowfully; "if they are to be hardy and vigorous they must be left to develop themselves. I would rather have Hugh hard and strong than morbid and weak."

But still she felt restless. It was not possible to settle to anything; and when

at last she went up to her room she could not make up her mind to go to rest.

"And yet I must," she said. "Hugh must be off so early."

She had given up the habit of going to his room, but to-night she felt that she must look for the last time at her darling asleep.

"He will never be the same again—school so changes a boy; and he will come home with his heart filled with new friends and interests."

Poor Norah sighed deeply. She was faithful to her first love; eight years since she had lost her husband, and yet she had never longed for him so fondly as she now did.

"What would I give for his loving help and comfort?" she said sadly; as she thought this, it seemed as if some of his gentle earnest words came back.

"You will not miss me so much as you think now, my Norah. You will find a higher love—a stronger help than mine."

A mist cleared from her sight—her sorrow seemed suddenly lifted. Had not Nancy Blane said that all her trouble was sent her for good?

"Do I really think I can be as much to Hugh as his Heavenly Father can?" she said. "I will go and kiss him, and not fret any more."

She opened the door of his room gently, and a sound startled her—a deep shuddering sob. She put down the lamp she carried, and went gently to the bedside.

But Hugh had not heard her approach —his face was turned from her, buried in his pillow. Norah bent down over him.

"Oh mother—mother, I do love you!" in broken sobbed-out words.

Norah's heart seemed to stand still.

Even the impulse of joy her boy's words created faded in tender solicitude. It was so dreadful that her bright, seemingly careless boy should hide his grief away; that he should have a grief which kept him waking in such violent sorrow.

She waited till his burst of sobs subsided, and then very softly she said, "Hugh."

Hugh lay still as if sleeping, but Norah laid her cheek against his hot flushed face. She whispered: "Hugh darling, what is it? Tell me, my own boy, won't you? You are all I have in the world now, Hugh."

The boy's arms clasped round her with sudden vehemence; he hugged her as if he would never let her go.

"Did you think I was all that time at Dawson's?" he said, suddenly stopping his kisses.

"I don't know."

"I only stayed a little time with him;

and then I went down to the Spar and sat on one of the rocks, and thought what a brute I was to you, mother; and—and—that I loved you more than ever. Only then I thought you couldn't believe it, because I'd behaved awfully, and when I came home I tried to say I was sorry, but I couldn't; and then just now I waked up and thought I might die like uncle Godfrey; and you'd never know I'd been sorry, and—" he paused, and Norah only answered by kisses. "Mother!"—his whisper was so low she could scarcely hear it—"I couldn't say it in daylight, but I am very, *very* sorry, and if I live I will be a good son; and I will try and take care of you instead of my father."

"God bless you, my darling—now go to sleep."

And with his mother's arm still round his neck Hugh at last fell sound asleep.

CHAPTER XX.

NANCY AT BUTTON COURT.

JOE stands by the old well at Button Court; he has been throwing stones into it. At first he listens idly for the slow coming echo, and then he flings down one pebble after another with a vicious impetuosity, till he provokes the chorus of hollow ghastly sounds that now break forth from among the fern-leaves.

"Drat that row—it's wuss nor killin' twenty pigs;" and he sends a whole handful this time with such dexterous aim that all go down together.

While the deep chorus is at its height

Robert Purton comes sharply round from the back of the house.

"What are you doing, Joe?" He looks very angry. "I told you I wouldn't have stones thrown down. Can't you find something better to do than loafing about here all the afternoon?"

Joe gives one of his searching glances and keeps silent.

"Somethin' up more than common; wants to get me out o' the way." And as his master stands looking at him, Joe moves off whistling. "Seems to me, Robert's riled more than's good for him; he's no more the man he wur a year ago, nor I'm a porkypine. He don't look it, neither — frowns mortal 'eavy — a cross betwixt a overseer and a bull-dog, that's about it; and what air he a-frowin' for, that's just it?" He stops beneath the walnut-tree and takes a furtive look at his master.

Joe would not have looked straight and frankly on any account. This would have been in his eyes an altogether "unfledged" proceeding.

"Ugh!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and made an indescribable sound, indicative of contempt.

"It's all along of them gals. Why wasn't the world made mostly o' men? A sensible chap like yon, cos he wur sensible, to be turned cranky all along of a gal. I'm sorry for you, I am. A gal says I?—maybe there's two on 'em: that 'un as comed along of Master Llewellyn, and the t'other 'un as should ha' got them letters."

He laughed, and his black eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Now, if she'd ha' got 'em, as like as not she'd ha' been here too, and then where would I ha' been? Maybe, Robert might ha' gone up to Shallerton, and got

married to her, and brought her over reg'lar tied up—no—not if I knows it."

An indescribable look of malicious fun passed over his face. He pulled out a clasp-knife, and began to chip viciously at the trunk of the walnut-tree.

Robert Purton had moved on to the farm-house, and when Joe looked towards the well again his master had disappeared.

"I'm plaguy glad he's gone, blowed if I ain't, a-spyin' on me like this."

He shut up his knife, and thrust it into his pockets, kept his hands there, and whistled viciously.

The whistle suddenly changed into a shrill note of surprise.

"What the mischief's up now?"

The gate beyond the walnut-trees had been opened gently, but it fell back into its place with a sharp sound that startled Joe into alertness.

He found himself face to face with a tall young woman, dressed in deep mourning. He had never seen her, but Joe guessed by instinct who she was, and he shrank up in a heap against the tree.

Only for a minute, and then he held up his head, and scanned the visitor between his half-closed eyelids with more than his usual coolness.

"Trespassers ain't allowed here noways, and this ain't a show-farm neither, miss, if it's all the same to you."

"Is this Button Court?" said Nancy, and then she smiled. "You mustn't mind me, Joe; it's all right. You are Joe, I believe? Will you please tell your master some one wants particularly to see him?"

"What's yer name?"

Nancy grew crimson under the boy's sneering gaze. "Say some one from Shallerton," she said simply.

"Well, the master ain't at home, miss, nor likely to come home. He's out a-visiting, he is. 'All right!' All wrong, I say," he muttered.

He saw her blush fade into a look of sadness.

"But he will be home to-day. I could go in and wait if he'll be home presently."

"Blowed if you do. I'm up to that dodge."

Then aloud:

"Home to-day! Bless you! no, nor to-morrow: nor I don't know when, he's always somewheres. Never see such a gadabout as master have grown. Dunno what's took him."

He looked so simply into her face that Nancy gave up her first suspicion that the boy was deceiving her.

She had heard much of Joe and his odd ways in the time before Robert had con-

fessed his love. He was only rude in his fidelity, she thought.

She smiled—smiled with such winning sweetness, that Joe turned away in sudden wrath.

"None o' that gammon for me. I'm not a soft like Robert. Yes, I know the ways on 'em. She'd just smile herself into the place, and once she was missis, she'd smile me out of it. Not if I knows it, Miss Blane. I knows a precious sight more about you than you knows about me, I can tell ye. I read every word o' them letters afore I burned 'em."

"At any rate, you can give a message for me," Nancy spoke timidly.

The boy's silence made her feel an unwelcome intruder.

Joe looked over his shoulder. He was in dread that Robert might come round the corner again.

"If it's not too long a one," he said. "I'm hawful busy."

Nancy looked at him fearlessly.

"If you think you can't remember," she said, "I can write it. Perhaps that will be best."

"Tell us it: I can say it fast enough," said Joe, roused to a sense of consequences, when Nancy turned towards the gate.

"You need only say some one has been to see him from Shallerton," she said, doubtfully.

She could not say any more. There was an impertinence in Joe's half-closed eyes which checked her words. She could not trust her name to this boy.

She turned away heavy-hearted, disappointed, surprised at her own cowardice.

It had been so hard to make up her mind to come, and yet she had felt it was

a simple act of justice to her lover and to herself, and now the effort had been made unnecessary.

"I could not come again."

She quivered with shame at the remembrance of Joe's insolent glances.

"How can I know Robert wishes to see me? I have only Mrs. Llewellyn's word."

In an instant it seemed to her as if Robert's absence had been a merciful escape. He had tired, no doubt, of her hardness, and had resolved to do without her love. Hitherto, she had given him no cause for despising her; till to-day, there had been no act or word of hers which, in looking back on, she felt he could call unmaidenly.

The quick hot blood rushed to her forehead, and seemed almost to stifle her with its shaming violence. She pushed the

white gate hard, and hurried through it, careless of the force with which it swung back on its post; then, without one glance behind her, she ran back towards the road.

The coach would not pass for some hours; but Nancy was moved beyond all power of self-control or memory; her one thought and hope was how to escape from Button Court, so as to leave no trace of her presence there.

"That boy will tell him, and he will easily guess who it was."

And her heart beat faster yet; she stumbled, as she hurried along, against huge stones, which stuck up edgeways in the road, as if to arrest her progress.

"But the boy may forget. Even if he does tell, Robert can't find me. I am never going back to Shallerton—never. I will not go even to Mrs. Llewellyn."

In that movement of startled pride, Nancy thought she would hide herself away for ever from all that she had been so fondly hoping for.

She stopped at last. Just before the narrow winding lane joined the road it broadened; a shallow brook ran across it, paved with pebbles glittering through the slender shining stream. In this were set huge granite stepping-stones, and at a gap into the field from which the brook issued was a rough stile; a block of grey stone, blistered with orange lichen, was poised between two rude uprights of the same material. They looked as if a giant's hand had flung them there in careless sport, and, mocking their prostrate strength, lady-ferns peeped beneath the transverse block, and above it a tall foxglove nodded its bells over myriads of little golden stars that gemmed the grass below.

Nancy crossed the stepping-stones and then stood resting against the huge stile.

The action and the cool granite calmed her. There was a dead stillness in the air which also helped to soothe. She took off her hat and smoothed her dark hair from her forehead.

"I am growing silly," she thought. "Mrs. Llewellyn would not have urged me to seek out Robert if it were wrong or forward; and yet all along I shrank from coming. Ah, if it had been right to come —if I was meant to be Robert's wife, I should have found him at home. He would have been there to meet me instead of that boy."

She forced herself to stand quietly till stillness took the place of agitation. The red flush left her face, but a heavy-hearted depression succeeded. Nancy felt weary, utterly tired out. She must gain the

high-road and wait there for the coach. She had no heart to set out on that walk to Sparmouth, which had seemed but now so easy as she hurried from Button Court.

But she might rest a little longer leaning against the stone stile. Joe had said his master's return was far off—there was no chance of any one seeing her there. Her mind was so full of sorrow that she could not think—could not step out of the present. Hitherto she had tried to receive her trials as sent to her, and had gained the blessed faculty of endurance; but in these last days Nancy had gradually yielded herself up to belief in a coming joy. It was so hard to give this up—harder than it had been to bear all the rest. She knew now how she had been living on the hope of this meeting with Robert.

She was so still that the rabbits peeped out from the hedge-bank in the field, and came slyly round to the stile before they popped in again. A yellowhammer hopped close up to Nancy with his head on one side: the lark began to sing overhead as if there were cause for thanksgiving in the girl's sorrow.

Nancy glanced round with a loving, longing look. How often must Robert's feet have trodden along the lane? perhaps he had often rested as she was resting against the rude stile.

She pressed her hand tenderly on the rough granite, and a hot tear fell there. The sight of its dark stain roused her to self-pity. Nancy bent down over her hand and cried bitterly.

Presently she raised her head. She smiled and wiped her eyes.

"Rizpah was right after all. Girls are

safe to be selfish when they have only self to care for. I haven't had time to think of self till now. There was father first; and then my poor darling Miriam; and now there's only me." She pushed her hair off her face and drew herself up in readiness to proceed on the journey. "I'm as selfish as any one when I've got nought to do; the sooner I get to work the better. I see, I'm only safe from self when there's others to be cared for. Lord help me!"

She moved a step forward towards the road—only one, and then the resolution that had shone out in her eyes failed. A quick flush rose again in her cheeks. Her heart beat in hard throbs. There were firm rapid steps coming towards her on the path across the field beyond the stile; she could not look up, but the sound held her inert and powerless.

The lark sang yet louder, as if to welcome the intruder; but the rabbits scuttled into their holes again, and the yellowhammer put his head first on one side and then on the other, and hopped on in advance to get a good look at Robert Purton.

Robert came up to the stile and then he paused. Nancy could not raise her eyes, but he saw her trouble in her face. His own heart was full of joy and love; but even then he thought more of the feelings of the woman he loved than of himself.

He took her hand gently and held it in his own.

"I'm waiting for the coach," she said faintly.

"Yes," he said, "but won't you come on to the Court and rest? the coach won't be here yet awhile."

Nancy looked up. She could not gather in the meaning of his words, but his bright

manly face glowed with tenderness; his eyes met hers with a truth and fervour that swept doubt away—away with the weary months that had shadowed her life and his love since their first short parting. It was as if that first love-meeting had gone on without interruption.

"Let us stay here," said Nancy. She moved a little away that he might cross the stile; timidly, as if the movement betrayed her love.

"Nancy,"—the young man was close beside her in an instant, and he spoke in passionate earnest words—"you will be my wife now? there is nothing to hinder it if you can only love me." He held both her hands in his as if he never meant to let them go.

Nancy's deep grey eyes opened widely on her lover, and then a sweet happy smile parted her full lips.

"Do you think I came all this way to say I can't love you?" she said, and then her eyes drooped as if the glow on her cheek scorched them.

"You are a darling!" was all that Robert answered; but he held her to his heart a long while, silently thanking God for this ending to all his doubt and trouble.

Joe had not been idle. As soon as Nancy disappeared he went in search of his master. He saw him at last crossing the field, and he guessed from the direction he had taken that Robert had caught sight of the intruder.

"If he goes and ketches her up, it's all up with me," he said ruefully. For an instant he thought of trying to stop Robert, but he knew this would be useless.

"It's all along of that cussed gate, and that gal's imperence in letting of it swing

so hard. Confound her! Now, Joe, which ever'll you do? cut and run, or stay and get horsewhipped out of the place?" He paused in thought, and then he put both hands to his head. "My eyes, there's them there letters! it 'ull all be hout as safe as a gun; they'll put that and t'other together, and make it all as clear as mud. There's nothing for it but to cut, and that precious quick too. Robert will be back as savage as two bears in one skin," and then a look of dismay came in his face.

"There's more than a fortnight's wages owing me."

He went into the kitchen.

"I ain't a thief, and I ain't time to get no clothes nor none of my things, and I ain't such a soft as to go without my lawful wages. I got a clear right to their vally, and shan't take no clothes; but these 'll do, and stow away easy.

Now, Miss Nancy, if you're a-comin' to be missis at Button Court, you'd best buy Robert a set o' new teaspoons. I ha' been used to silver so long," he said reflectively as he pocketed the teaspoons, "that it mightn't, perhaps, agree with me to take up with pewter. I'm off for London. I've seen enough o' these plodding country louts, and I'm clean thrown away on 'em : they're like turnips, that stuffed up with theyselves, they've no room to consider the capacities of other people. There's no such thing as a lark to be got neither. I've been here long enough a rustic; I should grow stoopid if I stayed."

He looked round to make sure he had pocketed all that was available, and then ran down to the gate, vaulted over it, and hurried away in exactly the opposite direction to that which Nancy had taken.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

SOME weeks have gone by since Rizpah Blanc took service with that rich old bachelor, Mr. Crane, who lives about two miles from Shallerton, on the road across Dinton Moor. Mr. Crane is rich, but he is also miserly; he has a good-sized house, but he keeps only an out-door man-servant and a maid; as Rizpah herself would express it, "her does for Mr. Crane."

She has been over to Sparmouth already for a day and a night, on the occasion of her niece's wedding, and now she has surprised Mr. Crane, by asking leave of

absence for an afternoon. "I do love shopping," she said; "it's a real entertainment."

The "shopping" is a figure of speech. Rizpah is impatient to relate the news of Nancy's marriage to her friend and counsellor, Miss Topper. In the absence of Miss Wackstead, now Mrs. Purton, Rizpah will put up with the gossip at the post-office.

She finds Dorothy and Miss Lovage in close chat over a cup of tea.

The dressmaker gives a little conscious start, which informs Rizpah that she and her niece are under discussion.

She turns her back on the languishing spinster and looks crossly at Miss Topper.

A grim smile crosses Dorothy's face and rests on the ridges round her mouth, but her small green eyes are very hard and sarcastic.

"I'm glad to see you, Miss Blane; you're

quite a stranger. Take a seat, and have a cup of tea. I thought you would have looked in before now to see old friends, but I s'pose there's nothing like novelty now-a-days?"

Miss Topper glances carelessly towards the high stool beyond the half-door, to make sure that her deputy has not fallen asleep.

"So I would ha' come before," says Rizpah miserably. "You know I would, ma'am, but my sakes! in this world there's no pleasing no folk. It's bad enough at sixty to push and have to begin life again, and for no fault neither, and then to be werrited and kep' that close, that when you do ask to go out to see a friend you get sour looks."

The green bows, a-top of Dorothy's cap, tossed, but Miss Topper suppressed her wrath.

Rizpah was a far more valuable news-agent now that she held the secrets of Mr. Crane's household, the miser being a subject of much curious inquiry; and Rizpah, too, had risen in position since her friend had married Mr. Purton.

For when a person we have dubbed impostor, or adventurer, succeeds in her schemes, she has at least the merit of success, and has earned a certain title to our respect.

Miss Topper disliked Mrs. Purton, where she had only despised Miss Wackstead, but she felt that a public functionary has an example to set.

"How did you leave your niece, poor girl?" sighed Miss Lovage, in a tone of pity.

"Quite well, I thank you, Miss Lovage. I don't see, though, as there's any call for any on us to pity my niece Nancy. I

should say her's as happy as the day's long, and young Purton's that fond on she as him's quite silly, and her's got a beautiful home—that her has; he's made it spick and span for Nancy, and she have two maids."

"Well"—Miss Lovage sighed, and got up to depart; the happiness of newly-married couples was not a pleasing contemplation to the dressmaker—"I am sure I hope poor Nancy will be happy. Still, when a man has changed his mind once, and dillydallied so long, he may change again; and there's no mending change after marriage; not a doubt he was all off it before her father died."

"I ask your pardon, ma'am,"—Rizpah spoke hotly—"that weren't no doing of young Purton's; it were a good deal the old man's fault, and Nance was proud and foolishly so, and there was, so her tells I now, some letters as went astray, and this

have helped to make a caddle; but don't you make no mistake about it, Miss Lovage, old Mrs. Llewellyn told I sheself that Robert and Nance was made one for another, and her's not a bit stuck up with it, Nance ain't, not so far; though for that matter the kindness as them two ladies have shown she might turn the heads of some gals round, yes, indeed, ma'am"—Rizpah gave what she meant to be a withering glance at Miss Lovage—"married from their house and all, and yet I do expect now, if Nance was to come to Shallerton, her'd notice you just the same as ever, Miss Lovage." The dressmaker gave a little hysterical giggle—she dared not trust herself to words.

"Are the young people coming to stay in Snow Street?" said Dorothy, loftily.

"Not as I heard"—Rizpah's face puckered, and she hesitated; there was

some difficulty in steering this topic. "Maybe Mrs. Purton feels it awkward to have a son and daughter so near she's own age. You see there's not much difference to speak of between she and Nance." Rizpah's softened tone showed her hearers she was not sailing with the wind as at the outset.

"Not more than fifteen years, I dare-say," said the dressmaker—Rizpah's eyes open to their fullest extent.

"Lor', Miss Lovage, you needn't speak so sharp; Nancy's not five-and-twenty yet, and I'm sure Mrs. Purton ain't thirty, so there can't be much to fight about. I should say"—Rizpah felt aggravated to sudden spitefulness — "there's just the difference atween they two as lies atween you, we'll say, and Miss Topper there."

Dorothy smiled with amusement, but far less grimly than usual. Miss Lovage

fitted on her gloves, drawing down each finger with the utmost nicety.

"I was unwise to enter into the discussion at all," she said, in her most helpless tone, "discussion being so very unfeminine, and the subject of age being one, Miss Blane, which I always consider indelicate for a female to approach. I'm quite sure," she said, with a triumphant smile, "your friend in Snow Street don't talk of her age."

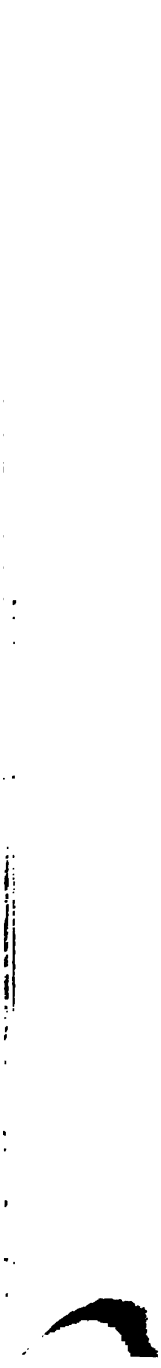
"Hold your tongue, Lettice" — Miss Topper studied her gossips thoroughly, and she knew that the dressmaker required occasional but severe "sitting-on"—"don't you see that Miss Blane can't speak out? it wouldn't be right in her so to do. When a man and his son both follows the usual course, and gets hooked into matrimony against their better judgment, it isn't in nature to think they care to show each

other the fools they've been. They'll get over it after a bit when they find they've only done the same as others, and then we shall see your niece in Snow Street, Miss Blane."

"But there ain't been no taking in, not in Nancy's case, at any rate," Rizpah burst out angrily, and then paused in a sudden chill of fear.

The sharp green eyes surveyed her open mouth and frightened eyes with intense gratification.

"It won't do to-night," said Dorothy Topper to herself, "not before that fool, Lettice, who does nothing but vex; but there is a secret about Mrs. Purton, then, is there, Rizpah Blane, and shan't you give it up before you're a month older?"

THE END.

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